

# Fighting Blood



Donal Hamilton Haines

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## FIGHTING BLOOD

*By Donal Hamilton Haines*

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THERE was a mystery about the death of Major Sherwood of the British Colonial troops in Egypt. Bob, his son, a boy fresh from college in America, determined to devote his life to disprove the whispered rumor of his father's cowardice. For this purpose he enlisted in the British Army and served as an agent in the Intelligence Service.

How he discovered the men who had betrayed his father, and how he won his lieutenant's commission in the British Army under Kitchener during the Campaign in the Soudan, makes a vivid and absorbing story that will be enjoyed by readers of every age who like a swiftly told tale of mystery and adventure.

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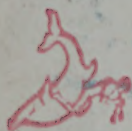


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FIGHTING BLOOD











CHARGE OF MAHMOUD'S MEN

# FIGHTING BLOOD

*A Tale of Kitchener's Campaign  
in the Soudan*

BY  
DONAL HAMILTON HAINES

*With Illustrations by*  
A. THIEME



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# FIGHTING BLOOD

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## CHAPTER I

### A SORRY HOME-COMING

IN the stiff breeze which came whipping across the blue waters of the Mediterranean, Bob Sherwood leaned on the rail of the steamer which was carrying him toward the Egyptian coast and strained his eyes to catch the first glimpse of the towers and minarets of Alexandria. Another half-hour at the most, he thought as he glanced at his watch, and he would be in sight of the familiar water-front which he had not seen for six years, where his father, Major Sherwood, of the Egyptian army, would be waiting for him.

American though he was in appearance, in blood and in the training of the past six years, Bob still experienced a thrill of home-coming in this return to the country where the first fifteen years of his life had been spent and where he expected to put in a great many more. Egypt was far more to him than the land where he had grown



from a toddling two-year-old to a strapping, sun-scorched fellow of fifteen; it was to be the scene of that army career which, to his way of thinking, was the only one worth having.

‘I wonder,’ he thought as his sharp eyes made out the faint blue haze that marked the low-lying coast, ‘what Dad will say when I tell him that I’m just as keen on soldiering as ever? I know he sent me to America to get the idea out of my head if he could, and yet I believe he’ll be glad it’s still there!’

He had proved too much ‘a chip of the old block’ to be turned from his boyish ambition by two years in an American ‘prep school’ and four more in a small Eastern college. His father, Sherwood Bey, had resigned from the American army and come to Egypt twenty years earlier, because foreign service offered far more chance of the action he enjoyed than the infrequent Indian wars of the Far West, and during those years he had seen almost constant service against Egypt’s implacable foes, the Dervishes, who had not yet been conquered after sixteen years of fighting. Bob had inherited all his father’s love for the army, and his mother’s death when he was only a year old had forced him to a childhood lived almost entirely in barracks or even the rougher surroundings of frontier posts, so that he had grown up

without a chance to see much of anything save army life.

And now he was really to get into it in earnest! Given his own way he would have never left Egypt at all, but Major Sherwood, knowing that Bob's chance for advancement in the new Egyptian army, which was under English control, would be far less than his own had been, had insisted that his son go to 'the States' for a thorough education. Bob had enjoyed it after the first loneliness had worn off, had worked hard at his studies and graduated with credit, and yet all the time he had felt that he was simply waiting, and that the trigonometry and calculus and surveying were only helping to fit him for the job of leading troops! The waiting was finally at an end; within twenty-four hours he and his father — and perhaps Peter Garth — would be laying plans for getting him a commission.

'There is no one within sound of our voices,' some one a few feet behind him said suddenly in Arabic. 'We can talk freely here.'

Bob had talked more Arabic than English until after he was ten years old, and had forgotten little, although he had not spoken a word of it for several years. He would have paid little attention to the speech but for the tone in which it was spoken. Now he forgot his dreams and listened

intently, very careful not to turn his head lest the invisible speakers see that he understood what they were saying.

'That young fellow by the rail?' a second voice asked.

'American,' answered the first speaker. 'Go on.'

'There was a message at Marseilles,' the second man said, speaking swiftly. 'The plan was successful. J. will be in Omdurman within a few weeks.'

'And the guns from New York?'

'There was nothing said of them. But I should think . . .' then there came the sound of footsteps on the deck, and Bob heard no more.

He turned quickly, hoping for a glimpse of the two men, but they had already vanished around a corner of the deckhouse. He set out at once in pursuit, walking slowly, that he might not seem to be following them should they reverse their steps and come back toward him.

Vague and indefinite as the few words had been, they had been sufficient to drive every other thought out of Bob's head, for Omdurman was the Dervish capital, hundreds of miles from the Egyptian frontier in the heart of the Soudan, and that one word, coupled with the significant phrase 'guns from New York,' was enough for one who



had seen Dervish horsemen with his own eyes and knew the history of Egypt's campaigns against the Arab tribes of the Soudan as he had never known his history lessons at school.

'If I can get a good look at that pair,' he muttered as he hurried along the deck, 'I won't forget 'em, and Dad can have them followed from the minute they leave the ship.'

Intent on planning exactly how to warn his father without losing time, he increased his pace without raising his eyes from the deck, and the next thing he knew he crashed headlong into some one else who was walking even faster in the other direction. The force of the collision was sufficient to drive Bob against the wall of the cabin, where his head struck against an iron ventilator-pipe. When he recovered from the shock, he looked up to see another young fellow of about his own age rubbing his shoulder and scowling at him.

'I say ——' the other began angrily; then, as he saw Bob's face, 'Oh, that you, Sherwood? What a frightful hurry you must have been in to ram me like that!'

'Sorry, Layton,' apologized Bob, recognizing in his fellow victim a young English lieutenant who had joined the ship at Gibraltar and with whom he had talked frequently. 'I was thinking about

something else and didn't look where I was going. Hope I have'nt hurt you.'

'I shall probably get over it,' Layton answered with a grin. 'But what the deuce — unless it's none of my business — could make you so absorbed as all that?'

Bob hesitated an instant, then realized that the young officer was exactly the man with whom to share his discovery. Layton had been transferred from the Gibraltar garrison to a regiment assigned to service in the Soudan, and had already struck Bob as just the sort of companion he would be glad to have in a tight place. So, in as few words as possible, he told what he had heard.

'And you didn't get a look at them?' Layton asked.

'Didn't dare risk it for fear they'd know I'd overheard. Didn't you see any one pass you?'

'Don't think so,' answered the lieutenant, frowning in an effort to remember. 'And now how can we spot them?'

'Not much chance except to wander around the decks listening,' replied Bob. 'I think I might recognize either of those two voices, but I can't be sure. There are any number of Turks, Egyptians, and Arabs on board.'

'And they look,' added Layton, 'like a short-tempered lot who wouldn't take it kindly to have

one hanging 'round listening to their conversation. Wish I could help, but I haven't a word of Arabic, although I've been studying a confounded phrase-book all the way from "Gib."

Bob's reply was to close his hand suddenly on his companion's arm. Two men were walking toward them, and Bob caught the sound of one of the voices. Unfortunately for his plan, he had not yet learned that an appearance of eagerness is fatal to one trying to find out what some one else is trying to conceal. He met the glance of the taller of the two men who were walking toward them, and instantly the man spoke quickly and in a low tone to his companion, and then, taking Bob entirely by surprise, he asked suddenly in Arabic:

'Could you give me a light for my cigarette?'

'I don't — that is, I don't understand,' Bob stammered, realizing as he did so that he had made a gesture toward his pocket which had betrayed him.

The man had already reached out for the match. At Bob's words he raised his eyebrows in surprise, then smiled, but it was a smile in which there was no humor.

'My friend is very young,' he said, speaking in the same tongue, 'and the young are not always wise. To listen to words not intended for one's

ears is not wisdom, which my young friend will do well to remember.' And with a curt nod he took his companion's arm and moved away.

'What did he say?' Layton asked eagerly.

'Did you get a good look at them?' Bob demanded, paying no heed to his companion's question.

'Yes.'

'Then keep their features in your mind. There'll be a jam when the ship docks, and I may have some trouble keeping an eye on them and finding Dad at the same time. So if you'll try to watch them, I'll tend to the rest. I don't know just what it all means, but they're certainly up to some deviltry.'

'Whatever we do we'll have to hurry,' Layton suggested, and Bob glanced over the rail to see with amazement that they were less than a mile outside the breakwater.

'And I'm not even packed!' Bob exclaimed ruefully. 'I'll run down and stuff things into my bag and join you here inside ten minutes.'

Racing down the nearest companionway, Bob hurried along the passage, unlocked the door of his cabin, leaving the key in the outside of the lock, and began flinging things into his bag every which way. If he had realized thoroughly just how dangerous a thing it was which he had acci-



dentally touched, and how much he needed all his wits in dealing with the two dark-skinned men whose speech he had overheard, he might have been a little more careful. But the increasing sounds of confusion about the ship warned him how little time he had left, and he did not even hear the click of the key in the lock of his door. He snapped shut his bag, grasped the knob and pulled, only to have the door resist.

‘Now what —— ?’ he exclaimed, and began rummaging through his pockets for the key, when he remembered that he had left it on the outside.

For the next ten minutes he hammered and shouted at the door, but the hurry and confusion on the decks, the whistling and puffing of other craft in the harbor, and the heavier throbbing of the ship’s machinery as the engines were reversed kept him from being heard until the ship had actually docked, when a steward was attracted by his shouts and let him out.

Bob ran for the deck, only to discover what he feared to find — that many of the passengers were already on shore, and that there was no sign either of Lieutenant Layton or the two men. Elbowing his way desperately down the gangplank, he reached the wharf and began looking this way and that for Major Sherwood. There was no sign of him, but presently he caught sight of Peter Garth,

big-game hunter, guide, and scout, who had been the Major's closest friend and almost another father to Bob.

'Peter!' he shouted, 'Peter!'— then, as the stalwart, khaki-clad figure turned, he added, 'Where's Dad?'

Peter hurried toward him, and as Bob caught sight of the look on the brown face beneath the rim of the sun-helmet, a strange, cold feeling went all through him. Suddenly weak, he set down the heavy bags. Garth came up and took both his hands without speaking.

'Peter!' he gasped. 'Tell me!'

The other could only swallow and shake his head, gripping Bob's hands hard.

'Is he — dead?' Bob could hardly utter the words.

'Yes, Bob,' Peter answered. 'Don't try to talk till we get to the hotel. I'll take the bags.'

Through a mist of tears, hardly able to realize what he had heard, Bob followed blindly as Peter led the way to a carriage and gave an order to the driver, and he rode through the streets with his teeth set and his hands gripping the edge of the seat, seeing nothing, hearing only his own question and Peter's broken answer.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SHADOW OF DISHONOR

ALTHOUGH Peter Garth had spent most of his forty-five years in big-game hunting, scouting and guiding for the army, and exploring in different parts of Africa, he could upon occasion display a gentleness of which his rough exterior gave no promise. He knew that, although the Sherwoods, father and son alike, were made of tough material, Bob needed some hours in which to recover from the first effects of the terrible shock he had received.

Under the circumstances, he couldn't be simply sympathetic; for what he had still to tell would be almost harder for Bob to bear than the first dreadful news. So Peter had to avoid speech until he felt Bob was ready to stand a second shock, and his methods for accomplishing his purpose were somewhat radical but effective. He drove straight to the modest little hotel where he always stayed when he left the desert for Alexandria, ordered a meal on his way to the room, and then, while Bob was lying face down on the bed, deliberately took a small leather case from the pocket of his coat and drew from it a hypodermic syringe.

'Roll over!' he commanded.

Bob, who had obeyed Peter's commands since childhood, did so now. Peter showed him the needle.

'Pull up your sleeve,' he ordered.' 'There's plenty of fever and you've been six years out of the country. I'm taking no chances.'

When the slight operation was finished, he ordered Bob to the table and fairly forced him to eat. There was little talk. Bob was still too dulled by the blow to ask questions, and Peter had no wish for speech. Toward the end of the meal Bob felt a great and increasing drowsiness.

'Can't understand what makes me so sleepy,' he mumbled.

'I can!' Peter muttered under his breath.

Five minutes later Bob yielded to the influence of the narcotic which Peter had administered under the pretense of inoculating him against fever. The older man undressed him and put him to bed as though he had been a child, then sat down in a chair by the window, filled and lighted the huge pipe which he smoked incessantly, and began trying to plan how to handle the difficult task which lay before him. He was still sitting there — although he had taken a few hunter's cat-naps in the meanwhile — when Bob opened his eyes and looked about him the next morning.

'Rested?' Peter asked abruptly.



'I guess so,' Bob answered, indifferent to all else as the memory of his loss and sorrow rushed over him.

Peter looked at him thoughtfully, trying to guess the powers of resistance which lay in the slim, broad-shouldered body. Then he laid aside the great pipe, crossed the room, and sat down on the edge of the bed.

'Son,' he said slowly, 'I haven't told you all that there is to tell, and the rest is ugly. But you'll have to hear it sooner or later, and it had better come from me than any one else.'

Bob raised himself on his elbow, his cheeks going white under his tan, a look of bewilderment, almost of horror, in his eyes.

'You don't mean there's anything . . .' he began, and then stopped, unable to put into words the fear that flashed through his mind.

'Your dad, Sherwood Bey, was one of the whitest men and the best soldiers who ever wore a uniform,' Peter said soberly, putting his big hand on Bob's shoulder as he spoke, 'and nothing can ever make me believe anything else. He was killed four days ago not twenty miles from Wady Halfa in a skirmish with Dervishes that wiped out all of his little force—but one man. And that man brought back the story that Sherwood Bey was a coward and deserted his men under fire!'

'It's a lie!' Bob shouted, leaping from the bed, his cheeks flaming.

Peter's big grizzled head nodded vigorous agreement.

'It is,' he said, 'and I shan't know a really easy minute until I've proved it. But . . .'

'Why, it's absurd,' Bob burst out — 'so absurd that nobody can possibly believe it for an instant. Dad's been in the army since 1878, and there isn't another man of his rank with a better record.' He had the D.S.O., and you wrote me yourself he'd have had the Victoria Cross two years ago if he hadn't kept his own part hidden so another man would get it. Nobody'll believe such a man could turn coward!'

'I know, Bob, I know. I think it's no more than a black lie, and so does every man who knew Ned Sherwood as I did. But when you've heard the story as the only survivor of the fight tells it and how the few facts that are known fit into that story, you'll see why some people are ready to believe it.'

He paused and began stuffing tobacco from a worn leather pouch into the huge bowl of his pipe, glancing at Bob from beneath his shaggy brows as he did so. The young face was white and strained, but the eyes were steady, the lips firm, and Peter decided that he had begun in the right

way, and that Bob was ready to hear the worst.

‘Five days ago,’ he went on, ‘Ned left Wady Halfa with a party of sixteen, not his own men, but troopers from a cavalry regiment. His orders were to investigate reports of a raid on a tribe of “friendlies,” and then to push on some distance — far enough to find out whether the raid meant the presence of any large number of Dervishes. It wasn’t much of a job, one that would ordinarily have been turned over to a subaltern. But it was like your father to do things for himself.

‘With them went a civilian, a Monsieur Jonnard, of Cairo. Why this man went with them, what he was doing in Wady, for that matter, hasn’t been explained. He was either a Swiss or a Belgian, and claimed to be a correspondent for Paris and Antwerp newspapers. Beyond the fact that he’s been living in Cairo for two years or such a matter and never seemed very busy, nothing else is known about him.

‘They rode off into the desert before daylight five days back, and nothing more was heard of them for thirty-six hours, then this lone trooper, Ras Huly, came into a Camel Corps outpost, riding a half-dead horse and with a bullet hole through his own arm that had done a lot of bleeding.

‘Now, if Ras Huly’s tale were the sole proof of

what happened, it would amount to nothing, for the man is known as a liar and a rascal. But what little evidence has been found makes his yarn sound like the truth.'

'Go on!' Bob urged tensely as Peter paused.

'Steady!' Peter said warningly. 'I know this hurts like so many spear-thrusts, son, but you've got to keep a grip on yourself or you'll make things worse than they are.'

'I know, but . . . Never mind. Go on with it; I'll hold myself in.'

'According to the man's tale, nothing much happened during the day. They rode well into the morning, rested through the heat, pushed on to the village, reaching it at night, only to find that there had been no raid, although the villagers admitted having seen a party of Dervishes — Baggara horsemen of the Khalifa's picked troops they thought — two days earlier. Your father waited only long enough to feed and rest the horses, then pushed on into the desert, as there was a moon and it was almost as light as day.

'Up to this point, I think Ras Huly stuck to the facts. It all sounds reasonable enough, and it was just like Ned to push on at night without losing several hours which might be worth something. But from here on, the yarn turns queer, and I think most of it lies, though I can neither prove it



nor explain why the man should have lied or who could have put him up to it. Because there's no doubt about the genuineness of that bullet-hole through his forearm!

'He says that almost immediately after the start from the village, Ned began to act queer. Seemed to wish he hadn't started and yet afraid to turn back. Nervous as an old woman, sending men to poke around patches of shadow, creeping up on ridges and that sort of thing. Simply *could not* have been your father, unless he'd taken leave of his senses.

'And then — and here's the inconsistency in Ras Huly's story — in spite of all these precautions, Ned led his force square into an ambush. From the beginning, they never had a chance. There were between seventy-five and a hundred of the Baggara, and, according to the lying devil, the best battalion commander in the Soudan lost his head before he lost his nerve and made a bad plight worse. The fellow swears that if they'd pushed ahead another hundred yards, which they might have done, they could have seized, and perhaps held, a low, rocky ridge where there was plenty of cover. Instead of that, he says, the Major made them fall back, and they were in a pocket with the Dervishes holding the higher ground all around them.

'They managed to hold off the Baggara most of the night, not because of the man who led them, but in spite of him. For from the first shot, according to Ras Huly, Sherwood Bey was like a timid soldier under fire for the first time. He paid no attention to posting his men, made no effort to control their fire, thought of nothing but his own safety. Several times the word spread that he was down, and then they would catch sight of him hiding behind a rock.'

Bob had been listening with tears of grief and rage running unheeded down his cheeks, and at this he burst out again.

'Do you mean that men believe this story?' he cried.

'Wait, Bob, wait until I've finished,' Peter urged; 'there's not much more of it. Somewhere around two o'clock in the morning, the tale goes, things had got pretty bad. About a third of the men had been hit, some of them killed, the Dervishes had worked up to close enough range so that their old Remingtons and smooth-bores were more effective, and the troopers' ammunition was running low. But Ras Huly insists that they had killed any number of the enemy, and that they could have held out if Ned had given them an example. But that was just what he didn't do. He sneaked back to a gully where the horses had

been hidden, picked out the freshest-looking animal, and made a bolt for it.

'After that the end came quickly. The men made no attempt to follow their leader, but they saw his flight and it took out of them what little heart they had left. Pretty soon the Baggara rushed them and it was all over. The force was all killed or captured. Ras Huly escaped because he lay under two dead men and was mistaken for a third corpse by the enemy. After the Dervishes had gone, he managed to get back to the village where they had stopped the night before, then to the Camel Corps outpost, and finally back to Wady Halfa.

'Of course troops were hurried out at once. They found the place without difficulty, and every bit of visible evidence fitted perfectly into Ras Huly's version. The position *was* a poor one for defense, although there was nothing to show that Ned had been left with any choice in the matter, and they found the bodies of eleven of the troopers. There were no Dervishes, but of course they'd had every chance to carry away their dead. Of Jonnard, the mysterious correspondent, there wasn't a sign. But the worst thing of all, Bob, was that your father's body was found beside his dead horse a good three hundred yards from the position, and in the direction he would have taken had he been running away . . .'

‘Or going for help!’ Bob broke in.

But Peter shook his head at this suggestion.

‘You know as well as I do that it wasn’t his part to go for help,’ he said. ‘No, he hadn’t done that, although what he had done to get into that place is beyond my imagination, for when they found him his sword was undrawn in its scabbard, every chamber of his Webley revolver was loaded, and the barrel of the weapon was clean!’

At this final evidence of cowardice on the part of the man he had loved and almost worshiped, Bob dropped his head between his hands and remained in that attitude for a long minute while Peter watched him anxiously. When he raised his head, his face looked a good five years older, and the lines of his mouth and jaw were hard and grim.

‘Is that all?’ he asked in a voice from which all traces of emotion had vanished.

‘Just about. They buried Ned with his men where they were found. And the official report says simply that Sherwood Bey and his entire force were surprised by superior numbers and wiped out. Of course there’s no end of talk, because Ras Huly’s story has spread everywhere, and the whole business is mighty queer, however you look at it. What’s more, Bob, you have to remember that your father belongs to the old school



and that with every year there were fewer men in the army who knew him well. He joined way back in the old days before the British came to Egypt, and when the Khedive's army was officered entirely by foreigners. Most of his old friends have vanished, and the new ones — young Englishmen, a few Turks, native Egyptians — regarded him as an old-timer who was holding a place that belonged to some younger man.'

'But the men of his own battalion — surely they knew him!' Bob exclaimed. 'I should think they'd have torn Ras Huly to pieces for what he said.'

'In the old days they'd probably have done just that,' Peter admitted. 'But for the last three years your father commanded the battalion in name more than in fact. He knew the country and he knew the Dervishes; he was more useful on the staff and to the Intelligence Office than he was as a battalion commander. It's been just one piece of special duty after another for him. And then the battalion suffered somewhat in the Dongola expedition last year, and the new drafts came in last month; I suppose a third of the men in it had never laid eyes on Sherwood Bey.'

There was a moment of silence. Bob strode to the window and stood staring out, then asked abruptly:

‘What’s your explanation, Peter?’

‘I haven’t any,’ the veteran hunter answered simply. ‘I’ve hardly shut my eyes for three nights trying to find a handle to the mystery, and I’m as far from it as ever. But I mean to find the truth if it’s the only thing I ever accomplish on earth!’

‘I’m with you!’ Bob cried, grasping his old friend’s hand. ‘It’s about all there is left for me, Peter. I’d planned on trying for a commission, but that’s all over and done with now. They’d never make an officer out of a man whose father died under a shadow.’

‘No,’ Peter assented unwillingly, ‘I’m afraid they wouldn’t, and I’m relieved to find that you realize it without my having to tell you. It was about the first thing I thought of after I’d made sure that the report of Ned’s death was true, and I’ve thought of little else since. But I want you to look at the thing honestly, son.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just this. Until I find the truth or something else brings it to light, the army is closed to you, you’ve no chance for a commission. And with that true, there’s mighty little left for you in Egypt. And you’re young; you’ve your whole life ahead of you. With me, it doesn’t much matter. I’ve always been a lone wolf, and now that Ned’s gone, I’m more alone than ever. And we’ve got to face

the possibility that we may never discover the truth, that ten or twenty years from now the real facts of your father's death will be just as much of a mystery as they are now. And for you to give your life to what may be hopeless when you've friends and a real chance waiting for you back in America doesn't seem right.'

'Did you think I'd go back to America and leave this ugly thing behind me?' Bob asked.

'But if you can't do anything . . .'

'I'd rather kill myself trying and find nothing than to go back leaving it undone!' Bob declared.

A grim smile spread over Peter Garth's sun-browned face.

'I knew that's what you'd decide,' he exclaimed. 'You couldn't be Ned's son otherwise, but I had to try to make you see your chance, just as he would have done. But you've got to live; you're not too well fixed, more's the pity, and I haven't . . .'

'I can enlist in a native regiment under another name,' Bob suggested.

'Not by a long shot!' Peter objected instantly. 'You could do it, I guess. A few weeks of this sun and you might pass for a native, but as a private soldier, you'd have no chance to find out anything. And we'd be separated.'

'But, Peter, you don't understand. Even if I

can't be an officer as I'd hoped, I've got to be in the army. Don't think I haven't watched the papers. I know every little skirmish that's happened in these six years, and I know that this year is going to see the last campaign against the Der-vishes and the winning back of the Soudan. I've dreamed of that all my life, and nothing is going to keep me out of it!

'In that case,' Peter observed, thoughtfully rubbing his chin with his hand, 'it's a good thing you've got me to fall back on. I haven't got what you can rightly call a regular commission, but I'm drawing government pay all the same. Colonel Wingate, of the Intelligence Office, an old friend of mine as he was of your father, has asked me to raise a troop of irregular horse for scouting and reconnaissance work. There'll be only some twenty all told, and I can pick my men. It'll be hard work and slim pay, but . . .'

'You'll give me a chance?' Bob cried eagerly.

'Good Lord, did you dream I'd deny you one, boy?' growled Peter. 'I'd take you if I believed every word of Ras Huly's story!'

'When do we start?' Bob asked with the eagerness of a boy.

'We have started,' answered Peter. 'My troop's organized already, has been these three weeks, in fact. And they're waiting for me now out near



the rail-head of the railroad Kitchener's engineers are building out into the desert. We start for Cairo to-night, and we'll be swallowing Soudan dust by the pound inside thirty-six hours!'

It seemed to Bob that there was lifted from him a little a heavy weight which had settled upon him with his first glimpse of Peter's face on the wharf. So great was his relief at the prospect of being able to dull the sharpness of his grief by hard work that he forgot entirely the scrap of Arabic conversation overheard on shipboard, and the locked key in his stateroom door, never dreaming that there could be the slightest connection between those incidents and his father's tragic fate.

## CHAPTER III

### THE DESERT RAILROAD

EVEN had Bob Sherwood been wholly ignorant of the history of the Egyptian and British effort to recover the Soudan from the Dervishes instead of familiar with its every detail, he could have learned most of the long story by using his eyes and brain on the long journey which he took with Peter from Alexandria to the rail-head, far out in the desert.

They went first to Cairo, the Egyptian capital, where, save for the occasional sight of a black, brown, or white regiment passing through the streets, there was little or no sign of war. The city is one of the greatest winter resorts in the world, and in January, 1898, it was full of the usual crowd of tourists from every corner of the globe, whose number had not been visibly reduced by the persistent rumors that within a few months the largest army which Great Britain had put in the field since the Crimean War would go up the Nile with its allies to break the Dervish power for all time.

'We're going to spend a day in Cairo,' Peter told him as they left the train, 'and for you it

won't be much fun, because you'll have to sit and twiddle your thumbs while I'm busy.'

'What are you going to do?' Bob asked.

'I'm going to turn tracker,' Peter answered, 'only it's men and not game that I shall be tracking. I can't get that Swiss or Belgian chap, Jonnard, out of my head. Who is he? What's he doing in Egypt? What did he do in Cairo all those two years he's said to have lived here? How did he happen to be with your father and his men that night? He must have left some sort of trail, and I'm going to try to pick it up. The Khalifa's government in Omdurman has its spies everywhere, and there are plenty of white men dirty enough to sell themselves to such savages.'

'I'm going with you,' Bob announced.

'You're not going more than a quarter of a mile from the hotel,' Peter contradicted flatly.

Bob looked rebellious, and Peter fixed him with a big forefinger and his voice was sharp as he said:

'We might just as well have this out here and now, youngster. I'm your friend as I was your father's, but I'm also your commanding officer. You're the only human being on earth about whom I care two straws, but at the same time you're the greenest, rawest recruit in my troop, and when I give orders, I give them to Trooper

Sherwood, not to the son of my old friend. Understand?’

‘I’m sorry, Peter,’ Bob apologized. ‘I won’t forget again.’

‘Good! Now I’m off, and you’d better not expect me until I turn up. Go where you please, but keep close to the hotel, because I may be back at any hour, and I don’t want to lose time waiting for you.’

Bob was spared the lonely afternoon which would otherwise have been his fate by a sudden wave of drowsiness which overwhelmed him less than an hour after he had been left alone. He slept heavily until a repeated noise forced its way into his mind, and he awoke with a start to realize that somebody was rattling the knob of the door. Bob flung it open expecting to see Peter, then leaped back in surprise at the sight of a broad-shouldered Arab in a white *gibbeh* and the green turban indicating that he had made the holy pilgrimage to Mecca. Just as he was reaching for a chair, the only weapon in sight, he recognized Peter’s features beneath the edge of the turban.

‘Going to brain me, eh?’ the older man asked with a grin, already beginning to strip off his disguise as he spoke. ‘Better start packing this minute. There’s a train south inside an hour and we ought to be on board.’



‘Find out anything?’ Bob asked.

‘We’ll talk when we’re in our compartment on the train,’ Peter replied. ‘The partition walls in this hotel are thin and hotel servants have long ears.’

Well inside the hour the two travelers were at the big bare railway station, Peter had showed his pass to a sentry — for the rails were already carrying military supplies and civilian traffic had to wait its turn — and they had flung their bags into a compartment of the only passenger car in the train, which was made up for the rest of freight and flat cars, loaded with army supplies of all sorts. The other passengers were half a dozen officers, bound for their regiments, accompanied by their native servants. Peter maintained his silence until the train was actually in motion and the grinding of the wheels loud enough to prevent any one in the passage outside the door of the compartment from overhearing his speech.

‘Sort of took you by surprise, going out as a white man and coming back as an Arab, didn’t I?’ he began. ‘Don’t wonder, because I’ve learned to be a pretty convincing Bedouin. I could live in an Arab encampment a year and not be found out, I think. If I’d started trailing as a white man, I wouldn’t have found so much as a single track; it was hard enough sweating inside that turban.’

‘Then you did find something?’

‘Don’t get your hopes up, son. I found out just enough to convince me that we’ve a job ahead of us that may prove hopeless, and the little bit of knowledge I gained, although it’s just the sort of thing I hoped to pick up, is quite worthless as stuff for disproving Ras Huly’s story. All that it really does is to back up my theory that Jonnard was not the newspaper correspondent he pretended to be — and it won’t even prove that in a court of law.

‘If he’d been a bit more of a crook, I’d have picked up his trail without much trouble, because he’d have had some relations with the police and I’d have had their help. But he’s been very careful to keep out of their way, and they’ve no record of him at all. But a man who knows how to ask questions can get almost any information he seeks in the bazaars of Cairo — if he’s willing and able to pay for it. I’ve a number of disreputable friends in the city, and I’ve seen all of them since noon. I’ve also seen the hotel where Jonnard lived and talked with several of the hotel servants. And I learned that if the fellow was a reporter he had a strange way of tending to business, because he never did any writing at all. What’s more, he had no small number of visitors, but almost none of them were white, and not a few were Arabs and

blacks — who may have been perfectly harmless, or who may have come straight from Omdurman or from Osman Digna's army, which is in the field farther north. — Begin to see light, do you?'

'I think so,' Bob answered uncertainly. 'You think Jonnard has some relations with the Dervishes, perhaps with Ras Huly. But why should it have been to his interest to send back that black lie about Dad?'

'Why, I read it this way, Bob. Jonnard's been two years in Cairo, playing spy for the Khalifa's government. For some reason or other, he's called to Omdurman, and on the way, going better than half the distance by rail, he has a look at Wady Halfa and the state of the Sirdar's preparations. His plans, of course, are all laid in advance. He'd have left the railroad alone and ridden into the desert to meet his friends, but pure accident gave him a chance to ride out with your father and his men. He was too clever to overlook such an opportunity to cover up his own tracks. Now, you see, he can walk back into Cairo whenever he pleases with nothing against him.'

'I see that, but why the false account of Dad's actions?'

'Because the Dervish agents aren't overlooking a single chance to spread discontent and uneasi-

ness through the Egyptian army. The story that a veteran officer lost his nerve and deserted his men under fire will do more harm to the spirits of the men than the wiping out of two whole companies in fair fight.'

'Then it just happened to be Dad instead of some other officer?'

'That's my guess — and it couldn't have been a better one for their purpose!'

During the next four days and nights, the two men gave themselves to the task of trying to keep fairly comfortable while traveling up the Nile by rail, which is a hard enough task for those hardened to the climate, and well-nigh impossible for others. Bob, a little softened by six years in New England and New York, felt the heat far more than Peter. Although it was January the sun was like a furnace a few hours after it had shot over the rim of the horizon, and it did not cease to scorch until near evening.

After some six hundred miles of it, on a train which had no schedule, was drawn by a broken-winded engine, and had no mercy on its few passengers, they reached Wady Halfa — the old Egyptian frontier post and the critical point of the campaign of '98, although no battle was fought within hundreds of miles of it.

Although eager to reach the front, Bob would



have been glad to stay longer in the queer town, which was a strange mixture of savagery and modern machinery, looking, as one writer has expressed it, 'like Chicago in a turban.' In Halfa were the railway shops where sweating workmen of all colors had done the work without which the army would never have been able to reach the field, to say nothing of beating the enemy.

'Different from what you saw last time you were here?' Peter asked.

'Gosh, yes!' Bob answered fervently. 'That was a good ten years ago. I don't remember anything except sun, sand, dirt, and a few broken-down engines.'

'Lord Kitchener, the Sirdar, was the right man for this job,' Peter said with more enthusiasm than he often showed. 'He won his spurs here, he knew the Soudan. He knew the desert was a tougher enemy than the Dervishes, and he set out to beat it in the right way — with a railroad. People said they couldn't build a railroad from Halfa to Abu Hamed, but the Sirdar's done it, and railroad right this minute is twenty miles south of Abu Hamed, and the line's growing every day. Think of it, Bob, it's nearly twelve hundred miles from Cairo to the front, and yet we're going to put an army — a real army, not just a piece of one — in the field, and keep it fed, fit, and full of fight.'

And without Kitchener's mind and these steel rails, it couldn't have been done!'

After leaving Halfa they began running over the tracks which the wise ones had said would never be built. The road-bed was far from smooth, yet the train held the rails and made fair speed, while with every mile they saw evidences of the ceaseless labor which had brought the desert line into being and was still busy making it more secure — gangs of Egyptian soldiers in dirt-stained khaki carrying rails and shoveling earth, other gangs of the taller Soudanese blacks, white men squinting through transits and running levels for spurs and sidings.

But for the weight of his loss, Bob would have talked incessantly, for there were a thousand questions he wanted to ask — or had wanted to ask before that terrible few minutes by the gang-plank. By degrees, as the sharpness of his grief lessened a little and the thought of the work which lay before him grew stronger, he began asking some of those questions, and Peter talked freely enough in response.

'We shan't know many idle moments,' he predicted. 'When you're fighting a half-savage enemy in the midst of a desert, the hardest job of all is to find out where he is and what he's doing. Licking the Dervishes is going to be the easiest part of the

job; getting your army into his country, keeping it fed and armed, then finding the enemy are the really hard parts. And they know as much of our movements as we do of theirs; more sometimes. That's probably what Jonnard was doing.'

As Peter spoke the name, a flash of memory shot through Bob's mind. He sat up in his corner of the dust-covered compartment, staring at his companion out of eyes suddenly grown wide with surprise.

'What is it?' Peter asked.

'I believe I heard that man's name on ship-board not an hour before we landed!' Bob exclaimed.

'You did *what!*'

Swiftly Bob gave Peter an account of the snatch of conversation he had overheard, and at the words, 'The plan has succeeded' and 'J. will be in Omdurman,' Peter's bushy eyebrows met in a frown.

'That's queer!' was his comment. 'Either it's a strange coincidence, or those chaps were actually talking about the man you and I so much want to find. What did they look like?'

Bob gave as detailed and accurate a description as he could, but Peter shook his head over it.

'You could find a hundred men to fit those

descriptions anywhere,' he said. 'Too bad we couldn't have kept our eyes on them.'

'Every other thought went out of my head when you told me about Dad,' Bob said. 'But Layton may have stuck to them. He looked and acted the sort of chap who would stick.'

Peter shrugged his shoulders as he settled himself for one of the cat-naps with which he broke the monotony of the long days.

'No use regretting what can't be helped,' he said; 'it looks a little as though the Omdurman government may have a far better spy system than anybody had guessed. Well, the better it is the more active it'll be and the more chance we have of running across a trace of the men we want.' With which reflection he rolled himself into an ungainly ball and dropped asleep with the ease and swiftness of a dog.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE WHITE ARAB

THREE weeks or more later, Bob Sherwood (officially known now on the army records as 'Trooper R. Sherwood, Irregular Troops') lay on an *angareb* — one of the Arab beds which look so comfortless and are exactly the reverse — under the slant of a brown-walled tent pitched only a few hundred feet from the railroad embankment. Dog-tired as he was from a long day in the saddle, something had awakened him, and he lay staring into the darkness listening to the night sounds — the howling of a hyena, the slow panting of a wheezy locomotive whose fires had not been drawn, the calls of the Soudanese sentries beyond the railroad.

Although the actual organization of the little band under Peter Garth's command had only been completed on the day he and Bob reached the collection of deserted native mud huts in which the men had been waiting, they had been in action almost every moment since, and if Bob had not been trained hard, he could not have stood the work. There were only fifteen of the men besides himself, and they were a hard-bitten lot — two or three French ex-troopers from the famous Chas-

seurs d'Afrique, a Montana cowboy, a South African Boer, three native Egyptians, the rest 'friendlies,' that is, men from desert bands of Arabs which had not joined the Dervish forces.

Undisciplined, roughly organized, they could ride, shoot, follow a trail, and obey orders, and that was all either Peter or the army asked of them. And they got plenty of work! They had no bugle calls to mark the beginning and end of the day as did the regulars; they were in the saddle whenever there was anything to be done. They guarded convoys of commissary camels, strings of empty flat cars, fatigue parties sent to cut wood. And when not busy at this they scoured the desert for traces of the enemy who remained stubbornly invisible behind the dancing heat mirages to the south.

Only once had Bob and Peter spoken intimately together, and Peter had been brief and to the point.

'Remember, son,' he said, 'that while you don't wear a uniform and aren't a regular, you're being paid the "Queen's shilling" just the same, and your private business has to wait until you're off duty. I'm as keen on solving the mystery and clearing Ned Sherwood's name as you are, but we must both wait until the main job's done before we think of it.'

This day had been like so many others: up long

before sunrise, out into the desert miles beyond the end of the raw railroad embankment, scouring the hot sands, combing rocky gullies and ridges, beating up the wide patches of thick, thorny scrub, with never a sight of scampering horsemen in white *gibbehs* with colored patches to reward their efforts. The Irregulars, Bob knew, were only a small part of the mounted forces which were watching the country to the south, and behind them — much of it, indeed, hundreds of miles behind them — the Anglo-Egyptian army was gathering for the march south.

Yet all day, without any grounds or reason for it, Bob had had a feeling that something was going to happen, that there was to be a break in the days which were so much alike that it was impossible to tell what had happened yesterday and what the day before. It was probably this feeling of expectancy which had awakened him and kept him sleepless. After a little, finding himself wider awake than ever, he slipped from the cot, stepped to the door of the tent and looked out.

The little camp — only five tents in all — was pitched on the edge of a strip of scrub which protected its rear. The tents faced the open desert, now dark, now almost bright as day as the moon rode clear or passed behind clouds. The figures of the two sentries, motionless, leaning on their car-

bines, were black marks against the sand. Beyond them stretched the long hump of the embankment, the panting engine silhouetted against the sky.

One instant the night seemed empty of all human presence save the two sentries; the next it was full of rushing figures, shouts, the stabbing flashes of rifles and the drumming of hooves. It seemed to Bob that the swarm of white figures rose out of the ground like the goblins of a fairy-tale so sudden was their appearance — almost at the precise spot at which he was staring — so swift their rush toward the railroad.

'Goom!' shouted the nearest sentry, and after the single Arabic word, which means 'Awake,' he fired his Martini carbine at the swirling cloud of horsemen, then fell back toward the tents.

The Irregulars were not the sort to be stampeded by a sudden night attack. Even had the rush been directed at them, they would have met it, but it passed them by and bored straight ahead toward the empty embankment. Bob dived back into the tent, collided with two other men charging out, picked up his carbine and a bandolier full of cartridges, and then hurried out.

'Scatter, take cover and wait!' he heard Peter's deep tones calling. 'They'll go the way they came and we'll deal with 'em then.'



For an instant there was comparative silence, and it seemed as though the raiding horsemen had been unreal figures after all and that the night had swallowed them again. Then from beyond the embankment came another sputter of shots as the Arabs struck the line of Soudanese sentries. But the seconds ticked away, the firing did not increase in volume, and the cloud of Arabs did not reappear.

A less experienced leader than Peter might have flung his men pell-mell into the invisible scuffle ahead, but he knew the exceeding un wisdom of rushing blindly into a fight in the darkness when you do not know just where your enemy is and it is almost impossible to distinguish friend from foe. So he spread his men until they commanded fully two hundred yards of the way by which the raiders must retreat and waited.

Then, to the amazement of every one, there came a loud, sharp puff from the locomotive, and almost immediately after it another.

‘Now what ails that crazy engineer?’ demanded Hicks, the Montana cowboy, who was on his knees next to Bob. ‘Does he think he can back that heap of scrap-iron out of danger?’

Almost with the words came the explanation, for Bob and the men around him could see that the locomotive was surrounded by white figures,

and the next instant, after another pair of coughing puffs, it began to move, not backward toward safety, but straight ahead, although the end of the rails was not more than fifty yards ahead of it.

'Quick, men, they're after the engine!' shouted Peter. 'Don't wait to fire, close with 'em!' and he was pelting off for the embankment, his men at his heels.

The events of the next few minutes were too swift and confused to leave a clear picture on Bob's memory. He was too excited to experience any sensation of fear, to realize that he was going into his first fight. He ran as he had never run on the football field or in trying to stretch a long single into a two-bagger, felt the soft earth of the embankment under his feet, scrambled up, and would have caught a broad-headed Dervish spear square in the throat had his foot not slipped just as he reached the crest. Lurching to his feet he saw the white-clad figure drawing back his weapon for another thrust, and swung at it with his clubbed carbine. The man went down and Bob leaped over him, whipped up his gun and pulled the trigger at another of the flitting shapes, only to feel the hammer fall on a defective cartridge.

Before he could reload, he was swept into the very center of a mass of struggling figures, where it was impossible to use his weapons or even his

arms. He felt the impact of blows, a rifle or revolver was discharged so close to his head that the powder burned his cheek, then the pressure flung him against the slowly moving locomotive, and at the same instant there was a terrific yell and he felt the huge iron bulk give and lurch behind him. There was a grinding crash as the wheels left the rails, a roar of escaping steam, and the great mass plunged forward into the soft dirt, rolling part way over onto its side.

Chance rather than intention had brought Bob to the step of the engine, and he swung himself up and into the cab. The door of the fire box had swung open, and in the flare of ruddy light, Bob saw an Arab preparing to jump from the other side. The man heard him and whirled as Bob jammed in a second cartridge and pulled the trigger again, only to have the sickening click repeated. The man yelled and struck at him with what looked like a club. He only partly parried the sweep of the weapon. Had it struck him squarely it must have crushed his skull; but it was only a glancing blow. A million dancing sparks glittered before his eyes as he sprawled backwards, but before the black curtain of unconsciousness closed down, he realized that the face of his assailant, glimpsed for a second in the glow from the open door, was not that of an Arab!

When he came to himself, he was lying on his back at the foot of the embankment, surrounded by Peter and several of the men.

'Thank the Lord your skull's not cracked!' Peter exclaimed as Bob opened his eyes.

'I want to ——' Bob began, then changed his words. 'I've something to report, sir,' he finished.

Peter frowned in surprise, then stood up.

'Can you walk?' he asked.

Two of the men lifted him to his feet and Bob made the attempt. He was none too steady, and the ground had a tendency to wobble underfoot, but he managed it.

'Report at my tent,' Peter said as he walked away, 'as soon as you've got a bandage on that head.'

'What is it?' Peter asked in a different tone as soon as they were alone in Peter's tent. 'You look as though you'd run into something more than a crack on the head.'

'I did,' answered Bob. 'Look at this!' and he held out the second cartridge which had failed him in the engine cab and nearly cost him his life.

Peter took it, weighed it in his hand, and, with the quickness of a man who has handled thousands of cartridges, instantly detected a difference in weight.



‘No powder!’ he said.

‘I had two misfires,’ Bob said. ‘As like as not my belt is full of them.’

He slipped off the bandolier and together they examined the cartridges it contained. Nearly a third of them were defective.

‘We’ll look into this at once,’ Peter said. ‘One bad shell may be an accident, but a dozen of them can’t be. There’s an ugly look to this.’

‘And that isn’t all, Peter.’

‘Eh? What else?’

‘The fellow in the cab of the locomotive, the one who nearly did for me, was no Arab.’

‘How do you know?’

‘The fire box door swung open and I saw his face as he swung for me. He was almost as dark as an Arab, but the features weren’t the right shape, he had blue eyes, and I’d swear that his moustache would look almost yellow by daylight.’

Peter had risen from his seat, but at this he sat down again and stared at Bob blankly.

‘Are you sure of this,’ he asked, ‘or are you letting your imagination play tricks with you?’

‘I’m as sure of it as that I’m standing here. What makes you doubt it? No Arab would have thought of the idea of putting an engine out of action and tying up work for half a day or more.’

‘I know that,’ Peter answered thoughtfully.

‘The brain which planned this shindy belonged to a man who knew how much more a wrecked locomotive was worth than a few dead men. But what puzzles me is that the description you’ve just given me of the man you saw in the engine cab is almost identical with the one I got from the porter at the hotel where our man Jonnard lived in Cairo!’

## CHAPTER V

### THE DAYLIGHT RAID

SOME eight hours later, heavy-eyed from a night which had contained much hard work and little sleep, Bob was saddling his horse. The railroad embankment swarmed with men as gangs labored with the ditched locomotive, a screen of cavalry and Camel Corps troopers had moved out to the south and west, and the number of sentries along the line had been trebled.

Peter came out of his tent and handed Bob a sealed envelope.

‘I want the full details of this business to reach the Intelligence Office,’ he said. ‘I don’t trust the official report which went in hours ago. You’ll probably be questioned, and the I.O.’s are the sort of men to whom you’ll tell everything, whether you want to or not. If you don’t show up in three days’ time, I’ll know they’ve found better use for you. Now don’t spare that horse; he’s not worth a quarter as much as the information you carry!’

Bob set out with a light heart, striking for the nearest point at which he could hope to leave his horse and get farther up the line by rail. He was

beginning to lose his dread of the loneliness, which at first had been almost unendurable. He got along well enough when he was with other men, but the instant he was alone the shadowy picture of the fight in the darkness and his father's body lying beside the dead horse would come before his mind and he could think of nothing else. The picture hadn't ceased to appear before him, but now it filled him with eager purpose instead of horror.

Although his thirty-mile ride was without incident, it was full of interest, for every stride of his horse carried him deeper into the midst of the immense preparations for the advance, and the gathering of the army which was presently to sweep down upon the Dervish army under Osman Digna, the chief of the Khalifa's emirs.

Not until now had Bob fully realized how seemingly impossible had been the task of building the railroad, how perfect had been Kitchener's plans for the work and how thoroughly and swiftly they were being carried out. For the Soudan Military Railroad had been compelled to do double duty; it had at the same time carried the materials and labor for its own making and the men, food, and munitions of the troops which guarded the working parties. Moreover, while there were plenty of laborers, furnished by the Railroad Battalions —



Egyptian conscripts who fought with pick and shovel instead of rifle — neither the rolling stock nor the skilled labor was adequate. A few of the locomotives were new ones recently shipped from England, but the rest were patched-up relics of earlier days. Most of the mechanics in the shops were Italians, as the Arabs proved useless for such work.

Yet, exciting as was the sight of these preparations for the final thrust toward distant Omdurman, it was not enough to keep Bob's mind wholly from the queer state of his own affairs. There was a big bump on the back of his head which was a forcible reminder of last night's skirmish and of the strange face glimpsed under the hood of the Arab *gibbeh*. Could the man really have been the mysterious Jonnard, or was he only one of a considerable number of European renegades who had taken service under the black flag of the Khalifa's blood-stained rule? Was it possible that there was a connection between all these incidents — the scraps of conversation between the two men on the steamer, the wiping-out of Major Sherwood's men a month before, the white man in Arab dress, and the Martini-Henry cartridges with no powder behind the big snub-nosed bullets?

Absorbed in such thoughts as these, Bob put the miles behind him, unconscious of time and un-

mindful of the heat until the faltering pace of his horse warned him that he was pushing ahead too rapidly. He went on until he found a little water in an abandoned ditch and a bit of shade under a few sickly palms, unsaddled his horse, pulled the rim of his helmet over his eyes, and stretched himself out on the sparse, rank grass. He knew that sleep would certainly overpower him within a few moments, but he was one of those fortunate mortals who have somewhere a sort of alarm clock on which they can depend to awaken them before they have slept too long.

But he was aroused long before this invisible mechanism had time to function by that sense of being watched which will arouse one from the soundest sleep, and looked up to see a party of Soudanese infantry halted within a few yards of him, while the white officer in charge of them was staring at him fixedly.

‘Jove, it *is* Sherwood, isn’t it?’ he exclaimed as Bob opened his eyes and blinked up at him. ‘But what under the sun are you doing here — and in that kit?’

‘Layton!’ Bob exclaimed eagerly; then, remembering that they weren’t on precisely the same footing now he started to salute.

‘Rubbish!’ exclaimed the young officer as he saw the movement. ‘Let’s forget all that sort of

thing for a bit and sit down for a good jaw. I was headed for this excuse for shade when I spotted your horse. Where in blazes did you vanish to on the ship?’

At an order from Layton the grinning blacks flung off their bandoliers and squatted in the thin shade, and the young officer lighted a cigarette and Bob plunged into the account of his father’s death, but before the tale had proceeded beyond the first tragic event Layton broke in:

‘But I heard that in Cairo and never guessed that Sherwood Bey was your father! What a frightful blow, for you, old man.’

He did not speak again until Bob had finished his story with the account of the preceding night’s raid, then he flung away the stub of his cigarette, wiped away the perspiration which was running down his cheeks, and looked very thoughtful.

‘I’ve a small tale of my own to tell,’ he said. ‘I thought it was just a sort of schoolboy lark, but, after listening to you, I’m not sure that I wasn’t running some risks.’

‘When you didn’t rejoin me on deck that day as we had agreed, I started to go and hunt you up, but just as I was moving toward the companion-way, our two Arabs, or whatever they were, showed up and seemed to be in a great hurry to be the first ones off the ship. To go after you was to

risk losing them, for the ship was already being warped in and they were getting ready to run out the gangplank, so I took a chance that you'd turn up in time or manage to follow me and fastened myself to our friends without making my intentions too evident. I'm pretty sure now that they were on to me from the start, but I thought then that they had no idea I was trailing them. They were the first ones off the ship, and I let just a few tourists get ahead of me, and then followed, keeping them in sight. They took a carriage and I popped into another, and there was where I had my first bit of luck, for it was a dozen chances to one that my driver knew nothing but Arabic, of which, as you know, I didn't have six words which were of any use to me. But he knew enough English so that when I told him to follow the other carriage, but not get too close to it, he understood what I wanted.

'Now the deuce of it is that I don't know Cairo any better than I do Bagdad or Tokio and I haven't a notion where the chase led me. I know that the house where they got out was in the European quarter, and it looked a rather exclusive part of it, and I should say that it took us twenty minutes to get there from the water-front, driving at a fair pace. But that's as close as I can come to directions and distances.



‘Our two Johnnies got down, paid the driver, and walked into the house without so much as a glance in my direction, and that’s the last I ever saw of them. I might be able to find the house if I were set down in Cairo this minute, but I’m none too sure of it.’

‘Couldn’t you get the street and the house number?’ Bob asked.

‘I might have managed that if I’d known what was going to happen,’ Layton answered ruefully. ‘But thinking myself undiscovered, it never entered my head that I needed to use either speed or caution. Their carriage had driven off, so I paid my man and sent him about his business, thinking it would be a lot easier to do my campaigning on foot. That was foolish. Then, as I was beginning to think pretty well of myself as a detective, I decided I’d have a look at the house from all sides. I may have spent fifteen minutes prowling around on that enterprising business, then I came back to the same street meaning to get the number of the house just as you suggested. A hundred yards from the door a man popped out of nowhere — a dirty beggar in filthy rags — gave me one look, then began yelling at the top of his lungs and running.’

‘You never saw anything like what followed. A minute before the street was as empty as though

it had been midnight instead of afternoon, but before that confounded scarecrow had let out more than a few of his hoots I swear the place was jammed. And in the crowd were two of the biggest black policemen I ever saw in my life, who proceeded to collar me without losing a second.

‘Of course nothing came of it, except that the police official before whom they took me nearly broke his back bowing his apologies to me, and I wish I’d had Arabic enough to understand what he said to those two black bobbies, because from the look of them he was calling them several names that they’d never even heard before. But the important thing was that all the fracas had got me away from the neighborhood of that house, and done it before I’d had a chance to spot my directions so that I could get there again.

‘Well, as I wasn’t due to report for orders in Cairo for two or three days, I decided to hang around Alexandria for a bit on the chance of picking you up or gathering in a few of those clues which the clever chaps in the detective stories always find so easily. Of course I never got a sight of you and I lost all faith in myself as a sleuth, for I discovered just exactly nothing. But there wasn’t a total lack of excitement for all that.

‘I stayed in Alexandria just thirty-six hours, and in that time I was nearly run over by a carriage, a

tile fell off a roof and missed me by inches, and I came near being drawn into a row in the bazaar which I'm confident was got up solely for the purpose of slipping a knife into me. So, as you'd vanished and I didn't seem to be getting anywhere except into hot water, I sneaked out of Alexandria with more haste than dignity. — What do you make of the mess anyhow?'

'Nothing,' Bob admitted frankly, 'except that the Dervish government has a pretty fair network of spies spread throughout Egypt, and that a good few of them are white men.'

'Queer business!' commented Layton.

'Not altogether,' Bob objected. 'There are plenty of people who would like to see England come a cropper trying to manage Egypt's affairs, and playing in with the Omdurman outfit is the best means at hand for helping that just at present. I think a lot of it is harmless, but such things as tampering with government issue ammunition and putting a locomotive out of action are different. And I'm a bit worried over what the man on shipboard said about "guns." If by any chance the Dervish army is being armed with better weapons, it means they're going to be twice as hard to beat.'

Bob glanced at his watch as he finished speaking and stood up.

'I've lost all the time I dare,' he said, 'I'm going to hit the railroad and travel back up the line to the nearest I.O. man who can take over my messages.'

'Then you travel with me,' Layton said. 'I'm a sort of czar of some fifteen miles of road for the time being, and there's a chap named Gray, an awfully decent sort, sifting Arab tales for the Sir-dar's benefit at the watering-station at the end of my bit. He's just the man for you, and you can leave your horse here and go up with me on the batch of empties they haul in toward evening.'

'There's just one thing I have to ask,' Bob said as they started, he and Layton keeping their horses at a slow walk for the sake of the long-striding blacks, 'and that is that you tell no one that I'm the son of Sherwood Bey.'

'Of course not, old chap!'

'Don't misunderstand me! I'm proud of the fact, and perfectly sure that before I'm many months older I shall be able to boast of it. But until I can get to the bottom of this mystery and find what I'm certain is the truth, I'd rather keep silent.'

They were following a faint desert track, doubtless the route taken by countless Arab parties for centuries, in places deeply worn, in others almost invisible because of the constantly shifting sands.



In the main it followed the course of the Nile, sometimes close to the river, at other times bending back until it was two or three miles from the stream. For the first mile or two they saw no one, but presently, as they drew near a low ridge, a party of white-clad horsemen topped the rise and came slowly toward them.

‘That’s the very deuce of making war in such a country!’ exclaimed Layton with a jerk of the head toward the approaching horsemen. ‘Of course I’m green and haven’t begun to learn the ropes yet, but I’m blest if I see how you can tell the difference between the look of a lot of harmless friendlies and a bunch of the Khalifa’s picked Baggara.’

‘It’s not easy,’ Bob admitted. ‘The real Dervish wears patches sewed on his white *gibbeh*, imitating the rags of the holy man who started the whole Dervish rising years ago.’

‘Then, as far as we know, those chaps yonder may be Dervishes?’

Bob peered at the distant figures and nodded.

‘Nothing to prevent it except that your Dervish does most of his raiding at night along routes as well traveled and well guarded as this. That lot are Jaalin by the look of them.’

‘No doubt you’re right,’ Layton said with a rather sheepish grin, ‘but until I get a little more

used to this country, I believe in allowing myself a margin of safety,' and he unbuckled the flap of the holster at his hip.

Under ordinary circumstances, Bob would not have given the knot of Arabs a second glance, but Layton's uneasiness — which was perfectly natural in a young officer who was new to the Soudan and who had learned that fully a third of the black soldiers in his own company had been in the Dervish ranks a year earlier! — made him watch them with some closeness, and he was thankful that he did so, for had the surprise been complete, the two mounted men would have shared the fate which overwhelmed the black infantrymen.

Bob and his companion were riding perhaps fifty yards in advance of Layton's men — who numbered eight privates and a corporal — and were actually passing the hooded Arabs, who had drawn somewhat to one side to give them more room, when Bob's quick eye saw the muzzle of an old musket protruding from beneath a robe, and a brown hand stealing toward another concealed weapon.

'Look out, Layton!' he said in a low tone, and even as he spoke, the nearest Arab made his horse swerve so that the animal lurched against Bob's nearly overthrowing it, while another man had attempted to seize Layton's bridle.

'Break through, it's our one chance!' Bob shouted, jerking out his carbine, and thanking his stars that he had taken Peter's Winchester instead of his own Martini single-loader.

Layton acted swiftly, but, like a good officer, his first thought was for his men, and he swung his horse toward them as he brought his straight-bladed officer's sword down on the shoulder of the man who had reached for him. But the luckless black infantrymen had never had a chance; all unsuspecting, they were marching at ease with their guns on their slings, and they were overwhelmed and speared or cut down before they had a chance to fire a shot.

The Arabs had blundered in attacking the unmounted men before they surrounded the two riders, for Bob's carbine and Layton's pistol had emptied a couple of saddles, and before the gap could be closed, the two men were through it and for the moment free. Layton checked his horse and looked back.

'Not a hope for them!' Bob cried, seeing his purpose. 'You'll only do for us as well.'

Layton nodded, grimly silent, whirled his horse and galloped after Bob, the nearest Arab so close behind them that he flung his spear before he settled himself in the saddle and spurred after the two fugitives.

## CHAPTER VI

### EXIT R. SHERWOOD, ENTER ALI ABID

BEFORE Bob had ridden more than a hundred yards, he knew that unless a chance shot from one of the ancient and inaccurate rifles and smooth-bores with which their pursuers were firing happened to find its target, their danger was slight, for their horses were much fresher than those of the Arabs, and every yard took them closer to the railroad and safety. Within a few minutes the Arabs gave up a chase that they saw was hopeless, pulled up, fired a harmless volley, and turned back. Bob started to speak to his companion, and saw him white-faced and reeling in his saddle.

‘Are you hit?’ he asked, riding closer.

‘It’s only in the leg,’ Layton answered, trying to smile, ‘but it seems to be bleeding like anything.’

Bob dismounted, found the wound, a deep groove through the fleshy part of the thigh, made a hasty tourniquet out of their knotted handkerchiefs and saw that he had succeeded in checking the loss of blood. Then they pushed on, riding slowly lest the jar of greater speed prove too much for the rough bandage. It was nearly an hour be-



fore they encountered a troop of Egyptian cavalry, and another long thirty minutes before Layton, his leg properly bandaged, was lying on a heap of overcoats on one of a string of jolting flat cars, bound up the line.

‘A nice day’s work for me!’ he groaned. ‘I let my men get wiped out under my nose, and then get myself put out of action when it’s too late to do any good. I’ve been keen enough to get my name mentioned in dispatches, but not for such a piece of work as this.’

Bob saw that the young subaltern felt an even greater bitterness and disgust with himself than his words indicated, and did his best to comfort him, pointing out that such a surprise might have overtaken a far more experienced officer and that Layton had no cause to feel himself gravely at fault.

‘That party we ran into,’ he said, ‘was evidently another bit of the force which rushed our camp last night. They’d got separated, were on their way back, counting for safety on being mistaken for a lot of friendlies just as you suggested. It’s the first time the Dervishes have pushed close in any force at all, and there were bound to be a few surprises. It won’t happen again.’

‘I only hope I get the chance to prevent it!’ Layton said fervently.

Darkness had already fallen when the train approached the cluster of winking lights which marked the water station for the engines, which was also the headquarters for other activities. At this point the line of rails ran close to the river, and here, in spite of low water in the Nile, supplies were being landed from boats and then carried forward by the puffing locomotives. There was also a larger concentration of troops than Bob had seen anywhere else, and he caught sight of several British uniforms, conspicuous even in the darkness by reason of the helmets which the white troops were compelled to wear as protection against the sun.

As soon as he had seen Layton on the way to a doctor's care, Bob began hunting for Captain Gray's quarters. He got rather more help in this than he had expected, for the first white sentry to whom he put the question decided that a man who looked like a native, spoke English and wore clothes which could hardly be called a uniform was a suspicious character who needed to be investigated, so he kept Bob at the point of his bayonet until an officer had been summoned.

'I'm carrying a report of the wrecking of a locomotive which took place last night,' Bob explained. 'I want to see Captain Gray.'

The officer, seeming to share the sentry's sus-

picious, looked at him doubtfully and then led the way to a lighted tent without another word, and an instant later Bob found himself standing in front of a pine table behind which a slender, black-haired man in a captain's uniform was writing busily. His pen continued to scratch for several seconds, then he raised his head and looked at Bob out of the most piercing pair of black eyes the younger man had ever encountered.

‘Well?’ he said sharply.

Bob handed him Peter's report, which he had not seen, but whose details, of course, he knew, and the Captain read it so swiftly that it seemed he could have done no more than skim the lines of writing, or that Peter had set down the facts with the utmost brevity. Then he laid down the single sheet of paper and again fixed Bob with his peculiarly sharp eyes.

‘You saw this man you thought was not an Arab?’ he asked.

Bob replied that he had, and described the momentary glimpse of the hooded face in the cab. Captain Gray hardly waited for him to finish before beginning his questions, and he shot them so rapidly that before he had spoken more than a dozen words, Bob had learned to make his answers as short as he could. Never in his life had he undergone such an examination; he felt as though he

must have committed a crime of some sort, and that the man before him meant to force him into a confession. At the end of ten minutes, Captain Gray had learned all the details of the raid of the night before, the affair in which Lieutenant Layton had been wounded and his men ridden down, and a good deal of information about Bob — including the significant fact that he was the son of Sherwood Bey. On this latter, however, he made no comment except to give the younger man an extra sharp glance.

He was silent for several seconds, then he began speaking in Arabic, and Bob answered him in the same tongue. This new form of examination continued for two or three minutes, then the Captain said:

‘I don’t know just the military status of such irregular forces as the one to which you belong, but I happen to have need of such a man as yourself, and I shall detain you for my own use. If I have exceeded my authority, that can be attended to later.’ He paused and scribbled for a moment, then handed the sheet of paper to Bob. ‘You will hand that to Sergeant Lane,’ he commanded, ‘and will report to me at seven to-morrow morning, after placing yourself at Lane’s orders to-night. And I hope, for your comfort,’ he added with a sudden and unexpected smile, ‘that you won’t



mind doing without a bath for a couple of weeks or such a matter.'

Sergeant Lane proved to be a small wiry man with a moustache black as an ink-stain on his upper lip and a glance that showed why he had found favor with Captain Gray. He read the note, then gave Bob a long look of inspection.

'So I'm to turn you into a native overnight and have you ready to pass muster in the morning, eh?' he asked. 'Well, the sun seems to have done a good bit of the job for me, and I think we can manage the rest, though I won't promise you'll sleep easy after I get through with your hide!'

Sergeant Lane, it appeared, had been a 'dresser' in a big London theater before entering the army, and what he did not know about disguises and make-up was not worth knowing.

'I've got the only collection of grease-paint in the Soudan,' he told Bob as he went to work on the transformation, 'and I suppose I'm the only sergeant in the British army who can tell whether a woman's skirt hangs straight or not!'

For the next two hours, the little man was as busy as a beaver, and he made good his threat of being anything but gentle with Bob's skin. At the end of that time he regarded his labors and the object of them with approval.

'You'll do!' he declared. 'There's not an inch

of your skin isn't the color it should be; the Lord gave you the right color eyes and hair and a nose that might have come out of a bazaar-shop in Cairo. As for the rest, you must have satisfied the Captain on that score, or he'd never have sent you to me for the finishing touches. What dirty work are you to be doing for him?'

'I haven't an idea,' answered Bob. 'He didn't tell me.'

'He wouldn't,' Lane said. 'That's the way of the man. He'll not give you a word of what's in the wind till the moment's come for doing it, and be warned, boy, if you've not the grit for the job, confess it before you start, for I'd rather fall into the hands of the Khalifa himself than into Captain Gray's after I'd failed him. . . . And now you'd better try for what sleep you're likely to get on that heap of rags, for I doubt the Captain told you where to spend the night. And that's like him again; spending the night's your own business, so long as you show up in the morning at the time and place he appointed.'

Sleep is not easy when most of your body is smarting and when you can inhale a strong odor of drugs every time you breathe (although the sergeant had assured him this would not last long), but Bob managed to sleep in spite of it, and it seemed to him that he had hardly closed his

eyes before Lane was shaking him awake with no gentle hand.

‘One minute late and you’ll lose your skin instead of just having it painted for you!’ he was warned.

He got into the uniform of an Egyptian infantryman — brown jersey, sand-colored breeches, puttees and tarbush of dark blue — and started for Captain Gray’s quarters after a glance at himself in the sergeant’s tiny square of mirror which made him think that he would have to explain his identity, as he certainly bore little resemblance to the ragged irregular who had brought in his report the night before. But, while the sentry who barred his way accepted him for what he appeared to be, Captain Gray did not require a second glance to know him.

‘The surface will do,’ he said, ‘now for your instructions. Your name is Ali Abid, and you are the son of a tanner in Cairo. You belonged originally to the —th Egyptian, but you overstayed your leave and have been placed in a Labor Battalion as punishment. You don’t speak a dozen words of English, and are unable to understand a sentence which you may chance to hear. This will be the most difficult thing for you to remember, and the most important.

‘You will,’ he continued as he handed Bob a

greasy and tattered-looking piece of paper, 'report yourself at once to Lieutenant Sands, whom you will find in charge of the work at the north landing stage on the river. This paper will explain you — as Ali Abid, who has overstayed his leave. You will continue to be Ali Abid until you hear from me.'

He paused and looked at the supposed son of the tanner searchingly. Bob was exceedingly anxious to ask a great number of questions, but he held his tongue and waited because he had a shrewd idea that it was far better to ask no questions at all of Captain Gray than to ask wrong or foolish ones and that he would be told enough more for his guidance.

'It is entirely possible,' the officer went on, 'that during the next two weeks you will accomplish nothing except to work harder than you have ever done before, and be dirtier and worse fed. That is all that you are expected to do — save that day and night, waking and sleeping, you will keep your eyes and ears open and remember everything that you hear and see. If I thought you needed further instructions, I should not have selected you for this work. I leave it to you to decide what use to make of anything you may happen to discover. If you find anything which you think I should know, you will come to me at once.'



Now, from this instant, you are Ali Abid and R. Sherwood has ceased to exist. You may go!’

Bob saluted and started for the door of the tent when the Captain said in a casual tone:

‘Do you know your way to the water-front?’

Bob started to stop and answer when he realized that he was already being subjected to his first test. He had been told in so many words that he knew no English from this moment. He kept on toward the door, not so much as turning his head, and, as he pushed aside the curtain and stepped out, he thought he heard Captain Gray emit a slight grunt of satisfaction.

As he started out to find Lieutenant Sands, Bob’s state of mind was somewhat confused and not wholly enviable. A few hours earlier the information that he was to have a chance to serve the Intelligence Department would have filled him with pleasurable anticipations; but now he was actually doing it, and the prospect ahead of him contained nothing but hard work, little rest, food which would satisfy a *fellah*, as the Egyptians were called, but which would come far from doing it for a healthy young white man, and throughout this ordeal the maintenance of a constant vigilance which he knew would prove anything but easy.

‘I’m nothing but a spy,’ he muttered to himself,

‘and not even a spy sent into the enemy’s country, but set down right in the midst of the lowest levels of my own army. Gosh, I wish Peter could have managed to have sent that message by somebody else!’

He had a walk of perhaps a mile through a scene which could make him think of nothing except a combined military encampment, construction camp, and railway junction rather than an active invasion of hostile country. He crossed a network of tracks, dodging a howling locomotive which shot unexpectedly out from behind the corner of a corrugated-iron shed, gave the road without argument to the gun teams of a Maxim battery swinging out into open country for practice, and also allowed a wide margin of safety for the bobbing necks and ugly jaws of a string of camels.

It had occurred to him that he should have had a few days in which to grow accustomed to his disguise and the fact that he was supposed to be a native, and he was inclined to think that Captain Gray had been in too much of a hurry, but before he had reached the riverside he concluded that the officer had been right after all, for by the time he had passed a dozen white men who gave him not so much as a glance and as many Egyptians of whom at least half spoke to him in Arabic, he be-

gan to feel more like what he was pretending to be than what he had been a few hours earlier!

Lieutenant Sands proved to be a tall and very slender young man, whose uniform looked as though it had come from the tailor that morning, and who seemed to take with great seriousness his own importance and that of the work he was doing. He took Bob's bit of dirty paper, read it, scowled, handed it back, and said:

'Listen, Ali! You look a shirking, lazy dog and I think you probably are one. You are here as a punishment, and I mean to make it one. And at the first sign of loafing, you go under arrest. Go!'

Five minutes later a non-commissioned officer, who looked like a Turk and very likely had begun his military career in the Sultan's forces, put Bob in a gang of men unloading steel rails from the deck of a *gyhssa*, or native sailing vessel, moored to the bank. . . . And five hours later he sat down for a short rest, aching in at least a hundred unaccustomed muscles, convinced that if by a miracle he managed to stand the work, he would certainly be too weary to be of any use as an extra pair of eyes and ears for Captain Gray and the Intelligence Department.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE VOICES IN THE GO-DOWN

IF Bob had been asked to say how many days he toiled and sweated at the 'go-down' or landing-shed under the eagle eye of Hassan, the Turkish non-com, his first impulse would have been to answer in terms of years or at least months. After a few days of it, he felt that he had never done anything else since the very beginning of time and that he never would do anything else. His whole past life, the events of the last few weeks, the war of which he had become such a small and insignificant bit, seemed parts of a past existence with which he had no longer the slightest connection.

But for the muscular hardness which he had brought back from his different college sports in America, and the few weeks of seasoning under the African sun which he had already experienced, he would have broken down under the work. That he did not do so was almost as much a credit to the judgment of Captain Gray in picking the men for his work as it was to Bob's powers of physical endurance.

The worst feature of the endless ordeal was that it seemed absolutely useless and needless; a



hundred times a day he thought of the freedom, comfort, and greater importance of the Irregulars and burned with resentment at the chain of circumstances which had put him where he was. He had been much impressed by Captain Gray during their brief interview, but now he felt that the Intelligence officer was not so shrewd after all.

For after two weeks on the killing labor, bad food, and unbearable dirt, he had found out no more which could be of any service to Captain Gray or to any one else than as though he had been set on a desert island instead of in the midst of this human anthill. He was accepted without apparent suspicion by the nine other men who made up the squad in which he worked and at the end of the first three days he had schooled himself so well in his part that he had ceased to worry about a possible slip which might betray the white skin beneath the layer of walnut-juice and grime. Yet he learned nothing — and the maddening part of it was that the failure was due to no neglect on his part, but to the simple fact that there seemed nothing to learn.

At first he felt that his complete lack of instructions made his failure certain in advance. He had been told to keep his eyes and ears open every minute. What good were such orders? How could he watch and listen intelligently when he hadn't

the slightest notion what it was that he might hear and see? But a little thinking showed him that he was wrong on this point. He realized that a man who has been told to view with suspicion every sound and every action which goes on about him is far more likely to discover what he has been sent to find than one who is looking for one particular thing.

This made him feel a little easier in mind, but it made the task no easier. His chances of finding something out of the way seemed no better than as though he was working in the mule stables or the yards where the camels were kept. For his companions were little better than animals: their work was so hard and so endless that they had neither the strength nor inclination left for anything but food and sleep. During the first day he toiled he did not speak a dozen words, and he had been a week in the squad before he learned the names of all the other men in it.

Time and again, lying awake for a few minutes at night before combined weariness and drowsiness carried him into unconsciousness, he asked himself if he was doing all that was expected of him, if it wasn't his part to be more active, to ask questions, to induce the men to talk, to make an effort to get closer into their confidence. Once or twice he made half-hearted attempts to carry

some of these ideas into effect, but he either got no answers at all or dull and indifferent ones, and gave up the attempt, feeling that to persist might only end in making them regard him with some suspicion.

‘If there really is anything going on,’ he decided, ‘the surest way to keep myself from getting wind of it is to let them gather the idea that I’m the sort of chap who has the slightest interest in anything except my bed and grub.’

So after this the man called Ali Abid began to appear the sleepest, laziest, and most ox-like of the squad. He had nothing to say to any one, and drew threats and curses from the ever watchful Turk oftener than any of his companions. And yet the monotonous days dragged one after the other; nothing happened, there was no hope of relief, and it was all too plain from the increasing activity about the watering station, the ever larger number of troops, guns and supplies of all kinds which were going forward, that stirring events were presently to occur, and that there was every chance that he would be left out of them altogether.

But, as often happens, the break came after Bob had resigned himself to shoveling dirt or lifting rails and ties until the road was finished and the war over!

The men of the Labor Battalion (many of whom were actual convicts, although those of Bob's particular squad were only being punished for minor military offenses, as was supposed to be his own case) had no tents, but slept in the shelter of the go-down, protecting themselves against the chill of the Egyptian nights by their none too thick blankets and the additional warmth gained by sleeping close together. As a rule there was little or no talking after the men had huddled in their blankets, for speech between two of them kept all the rest awake, besides which they were too dog-tired for talk. Bob was usually the last one asleep, due partly to physical discomfort, but more to the fact that he was probably the only one of the squad whose brain was really active.

On this particular night he was staring up at the roof of the shed, wondering how many days he had been living this dog's life and how many more it would last, when he became aware of a suppressed cautious whispering on one side of him. Feigning sleep, he waited a few seconds, then rolled closer as though changing his position, the maneuver bringing him so close to one of the whisperers that he touched him. The man was silent for a little, then, evidently assured that Bob had only moved in his sleep, he resumed his talk



with the next man in the motionless row. At first Bob could hear nothing except the sound itself, but, moving his head a fraction of an inch at a time with the utmost caution, he at last succeeded in finding a position in which he could catch the words themselves.

What he first heard was only the end of a sentence, for he caught only the words, '... and then he will tell us more.' Evidently the other man asked a question, for there was more half-audible hissing, then the first speaker said quite distinctly:

'No, there can be no doubt of the end. Mahmoud's army, which is now somewhere near the junction of the Atbara and the Nile, will allow itself to be beaten, but it will not be a real defeat. It is designed only to draw these mad Englishmen farther into the desert. There they will be destroyed by the whole of the Khalifa's army, which is as numerous as the sand of the desert, so that there will not be one of them left. A month after the battle, there will not be an Englishman left in all Egypt, and the Khalifa's government will be moved from Omdurman to Cairo.'

The other man was evidently not convinced and wished to argue, for after a little pause the first voice said:

'Then you are a fool. For my part I wish to be one of the victors instead of food for hyenas.'

Then, although Bob kept himself awake by pinching, doubling one foot under him and other devices, there was no more speech and he finally fell asleep in spite of all his efforts. In the morning he was able to identify the two men, big Soudanese blacks, both of them, and all through the day he kept close to them, but as far as he could see they did not exchange a word or a sign, nor were there any evidences of such talk between any of the other men. But that night — although he had again to resort to heroic measures to keep his eyes from closing — his patience was rewarded. The two blacks waited for more than an hour, then, sure that their companions were asleep and that there was little need for caution, they talked more freely and in louder whispers than on the preceding night.

If Bob had not known from the experiences of his own childhood that the negroes of the Soudan, while some of the finest fighting men in the world, are children as far as the mental development of most of them goes, he would have found it hard to believe that the words he overheard were spoken in earnest, for some of them were such exaggerations it did not seem possible that grown men could take them seriously. Yet, wild and foolish as were some of the tales to which these two men — and perhaps many others —

had listened, their capacity for harm was just as great as though they had been perfectly true.

Bob could not gather all the threads of the business by any means. There were gaps in the tale that needed filling, but he had enough to make him realize that if the plot had reached any large proportions, it might prove serious unless it was checked.

Dervish spies, evidently acting upon common instructions issued to all of them, had been spreading this story of the first battle that would be an apparent victory for the Anglo-Egyptian army under Kitchener, then a second, fought far deeper in the desert, which would wipe out the Egyptians and their white allies and establish the Dervish power on the Nile for all time. It sounded as though the tale had been circulated entirely among the black soldiers, and in this the enemy had been shrewd, for the Soudanese were much more likely to be stirred and encouraged to desertion by such stories than the brown-skinned *fellahin*, being close kin to the blacks in the Dervish army, and natural fighting men who would be attracted by a prospect of conquest where the Egyptians preferred the peace and security of the Khedive's rule and the British protection.

Bob was tempted to go straight to Captain

Gray after his second night of listening, and a little uneasy at what he had done when he finally decided to wait before making any report.

‘If I make my report now,’ he reflected, ‘before I’ve gathered any more facts, I may do more harm than good. I believe I’ll risk waiting another day or two at least.’

Waiting wasn’t easy. For the next two nights he lay awake until nearly dawn, only to have the men next him sleep like a pair of logs. Naturally the days which followed these sleepless nights seemed twice as hard and twice as long, and it was that much nearer impossible to maintain his vigil on the third night. Indeed but for the sharp bite of some crawling insect, which woke him when anything less would surely have failed, Bob would have slept at his post and learned no more until too late. As his leg muscles twitched under the sudden sting and his eyes opened, he heard one of the voices in the darkness say:

‘It will be to-morrow, at noon when we are eating, and the men on the boats are paying no attention. A small boat, which we will recognize because of a bit of blue cloth on its mast, will come to the landing. Apparently the steersman will seem to lose control, and will run into the stern of the steamer. That will be the signal. We shall overpower Hassan and rush for the deck of the



steamer, where the men from the small boat will have dealt with the crew. Before this is finished, the boat will be in motion.'

'The man at the engines?' questioned the other voice.

'Is one of us!' declared the first speaker.

Thus far, thanks to the insect, Bob had been lucky, but now he fell a victim to misfortune. He sneezed, in spite of all his efforts to check it, and at the sound the two men fell silent. Bob waited a long half-hour, then, moving with the utmost caution, he began to wriggle out of his blankets. Twice some sleeping man stirred or muttered in his sleep and Bob held his breath. It took him five minutes to crawl from his place in the row of figures and reach open ground beyond the shed, where he squatted in the darkness, trying to see if there were any signs that his absence had been noted.

He had no idea what time it was, nor was he sufficiently familiar with the lay of the land — his work having kept him mainly in the area between the railroad and the river — to move in the darkness with enough certainty to be sure of finding Captain Gray's tent. Delay promised no help, however, and he set out, moving a few steps at a time, straining his eyes and ears in an effort to mark the positions of the sentries.

The next day he found that five minutes were sufficient for covering the ground at a leisurely pace, but in the dark it took him between half and three quarters of an hour, and he knew that he recrossed his own path several times before he was wholly sure of his directions. More than once he had to back cautiously away from the dark figure of a motionless or slowly pacing sentry, and but for the long, patient lessons in stalking which Peter Garth had given him as soon as he was big enough to lug a rifle, he would never have made it. At the end of what seemed a much longer time than had actually elapsed, a figure came out of the shadows and appeared before the sentry near Captain Gray's quarters so suddenly that the man jumped as he snapped his rifle into position.

'I want to see Captain Gray at once,' Bob explained, completing the sentry's astonishment by speaking in good English.

The sentries in the neighborhood of the I.O. quarters anywhere along the line were accustomed to challenging strange visitors at queer hours, and had learned that it did not do to waste time. So within a few seconds, Bob was making his report to Captain Gray, who began getting into his clothes after the first few words, and was completely dressed by the time Bob had finished.

'Go back as you came,' he said shortly. 'If the

men are awake and question you, make an excuse. Go about your work as usual in the morning,' and he gave a curt nod of dismissal.

Twenty minutes later, after another careful stalk which took less time because of his familiarity with the route and the position of the sentries, Bob crept back into the shed. He believed that his absence had been unnoted, but there was no telling what might have happened while he was gone.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PLOT WHICH FAILED

WHEN a man knows that at a certain moment something of a most unusual and exciting sort is going to occur, and when everybody about him is ignorant of the fact and he cannot talk about it to any one, he is usually in a state of suppressed excitement and exaggerated sensitiveness which makes him imagine all manner of things which do not really exist at all. Bob Sherwood was in very much this condition of mind the morning following his midnight crawl to Captain Gray's quarters. It seemed to him that the two blacks whose whispering had told him everything were watching him constantly, that two or three other men in the squad acted as though they were in the plot, and that he had never seen so many small boats moving this way and that upon the surface of the river.

As a matter of fact neither of the big Soudanese had given him more than a casual glance, both of them having slept like the dead throughout the night and been entirely unconscious of his absence, while the number of boats on the river was probably neither greater nor smaller than usual. As



the hour of noon approached, Bob's excitement increased, and, though mindful of the warning which had been given him, he was careful not to betray his uneasiness, he kept scanning the flat water-side landscape in all directions out of the corners of his eyes in an effort to discover the presence of some new figures which would mean that Captain Gray had taken his precautions. But he could find nothing; there was not a man to be seen who had not been doing pretty much the same thing in the same place the day before.

When noon finally came and the men dropped their work awaiting their orders to march to the open-air mess where the Labor Battalions were fed, there was no sign that there was to be any interruption of the monotonous routine, and Bob began to believe that there had been no plot at all and that Captain Gray's better information had led him to make no moves.

And then, with no warning at all, things began to happen. A clumsy-looking native sailing craft, perhaps eighteen feet long, carrying half a dozen men and conspicuous by reason of a strip of blue cloth tied to the top of her mast, suddenly appeared out of nowhere and began making her way in toward shore. There was no wind, and the boat was propelled by two pairs of oars. At the same

instant the two Soudanese left the group of their companions and moved a little closer to the steamer from which they had been unloading railroad ties all the morning.

Just where the slip in the programme came neither Bob nor any one else was ever able to determine, but somebody, either one of Gray's men or one of those in the conspiracy to seize the steamer, was the least bit too eager. While Bob was standing motionless, watching the little boat, the steamer, and the two blacks, and trying to make up his mind what course of action he should pursue, there was the sound of a scuffle on board the steamer, then the thudding, half-muffled explosion of a rifle fired inside a closed room, followed by a single wailing shout.

'Turn back!' a man's voice shouted in Arabic. 'Turn back!'

A few seconds later and the warning might have come too late, but the small boat was still a full hundred yards from the steamer and the six men on board had evidently been prepared for emergencies, for without losing an instant they sprang to life. Three pairs of oars splashed the water where a moment before there had been but two, a seventh head appeared above the rail as another man grasped the tiller, the boat's prow was swung round and headed for the opposite bank of the

river and the gap between the fleeing craft and the shore widened rapidly.

From the rear of the steamer there came a sputter of shots and bullets sent up jets of water around the little boat, but the men were rowing for dear life, the shooting was bad, and the speed of the boat made the picking-off of the rowers no easy task even for a good marksman. One man was seen to slump forward in his seat as though he had been hit but his companions tugged at the oars that much harder.

'They're going to get away, the whole lot of them!' Bob muttered under his breath, but even as he spoke a second boat appeared, evidently having shot out from the bank farther upstream, and began cutting toward the fugitive, traveling three feet to the other's two.

There followed a desperate chase which made the men of Bob's squad forget the mess call sounding behind them. Even the two blacks, their eyes rolling with terror at what they felt was the closeness of their own escape, stood still to watch. The boat with the blue cloth at its mast-head had a good lead, and if it could manage to reach the far bank of the Nile its occupants had a fair chance of escape. But the lead was being cut down rapidly, and in the prow of the pursuing boat was a man with a rifle who was a far better

shot than those who had pulled trigger so futilely from the deck of the steamer. First the steersman and then two of the rowers crumpled on the thwarts under his aim, and with the fall of the last man the affair was as good as over. Four of the seven men had been hit, and the fight was all out of the three survivors, who dropped their oars and sat abjectly awaiting their fate.

Hassan, the Turkish sergeant, had no intention of missing his midday meal to allow his men to witness the end of the little drama. He snapped out an order and away they marched, Bob among them, looking back over their shoulders. Bob could not see what became of the two boats, but he did catch a glimpse of three Soudanese, one of them in the oil-smeared clothes of an engineer and all of them fairly gray with terror, led from the steamer by a helmeted sergeant and a file of British infantrymen.

The afternoon which followed was the longest he had known since the beginning of his solitary task with the Labor Battalion. As the man who had discovered the existence of the queer plot and made possible its frustration, it seemed to him that he had become a person of some importance, and that a summons from the I.O. headquarters was certain. Yet there was no message of any sort; he ate his coarse meal in the midst of the men who



had been his companions for days, and when he had finished went back to the interminable business of piling ties onto flat cars. And by this time he had become so accustomed to the part he had been playing that he raised his voice with the others in the sing-song chant without which no Arab or Egyptian can work. Not until night did the summons come; then Hassan said to him:

‘Ali Abid, you will go at once to the tent of Gray Bey. What you have done to bring him upon you I cannot say, but I do not expect to see you again.’

Bob made no reply except the regulation salute, but as he walked away he muttered to himself:

‘I’ll bet that confounded old Turk could have turned me loose five hours ago, but meant to get every ounce of hard work out of me he could before letting me go!’

When he reached the inconspicuous tent from which the activities of Captain Gray’s little known but highly important office were carried out, Bob was in a very pleasant state of mind. He was sure that the long weeks of combined toil, vigilance, and nervous tension were behind him, he felt that he had succeeded in his task and expected that he would be told he had done well. But this feeling of confidence was a little under-

mined when, instead of being admitted at once, he was told by the sentry to wait, and then kept squatting in a patch of parched grass twenty yards from the tent for two long hours — an ordeal not made any pleasanter by the fact that he had had no supper.

At the end of that period, Captain Gray, accompanied by another English officer, walked out of the tent, looked at him carelessly without a sign of recognition and disappeared. Immediately afterward the sentry summoned him and indicated, by jerking his thumb over his shoulder, that he was to go into the tent.

Behind the plain table at which Bob's other interviews had taken place sat another man whom he had never seen before, a small, dried-up officer with a very red face and a moustache clipped so close that it looked like a smear of dark-brown paint on his upper lip. That he too belonged to the Intelligence Department seemed likely, as he displayed Captain Gray's trick of continuing to write while he let his visitor stand motionless before him. When he spoke his pen did not pause; he merely jerked from the corner of his lips the question.

'Are you the man Sherwood?'

'Yes, sir.'

Scratch, scratch, scratch continued the busy

pen, then another question, as jerky as the first but unexpected in its nature:

‘How do you like what you’ve been doing these last few weeks?’

‘I can’t say I like it, sir,’ Bob answered honestly.

‘Humph! Don’t, eh?’ asked the officer and continued to write. He appeared so engrossed in the task that the young man before him began to think that his presence had been forgotten, or that this was another of the extremely abrupt dismissals which seemed to be the rule, when the mass of papers was suddenly pushed aside and the small man leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t suppose you do. Not at all like what you expected to find it, was it?’

‘Well, no, sir.’

‘No. And that’s true of most army jobs. They sound fine when you read about them in story-books, but in hard fact they’re not pretty at all. Things were botched badly this afternoon, but we can’t find that it was through any fault of yours.’

He paused, and Bob had an idea that this was probably the only commendation he would ever receive for what he had done — which proved to be exactly the case.

After remaining silent a moment the officer continued:

'You happen to fit our needs. If you were a regular, we should simply appropriate you; as you're not, we're offering you a choice. You will probably have to go through experiences much worse than those of the past few weeks, and there'll be few rewards, but' — he paused and gave Bob a quick, straight look — 'I know your name and a little of your history.'

'Did you know my father, sir?' Bob asked quickly.

'I did. That's why I'm offering you the sort of chance I know he would have taken. Will you take it?'

'Of course, sir.'

'Good! Go treat yourself to a bath, a sleep between clean blankets and your own clothes. I imagine you can do with all of them, and there's no telling when you'll get all of them together again. Sergeant Lane will take care of you. And in the morning you'll report here immediately after reveille.'



## CHAPTER IX

### THE EVE OF BATTLE

SERGEANT LANE was even heavier-handed in helping Bob to remove the walnut stain than he had been in applying it, but in spite of this rough handling and the sergeant's busy tongue, Bob slept so heavily that it seemed to him he had no more than stretched out his long legs beneath the blankets when bugles were shrilling in all directions and Lane aroused him by the effective method of rolling him out of his blankets.

At the I.O. headquarters, he found Captain Gray and Captain Blake, the short man who had received him the night before, both looking as though they had been up and at work for hours, but that they could continue at the same pace for more hours without thought of sleep or rest.

'You are to leave at once,' Captain Gray told him, beginning with his habitual abruptness and brevity, 'and rejoin the irregular force to which you were originally attached. Until after the general action, which will be fought within a few days, you will continue to serve with this force. It is necessary that you know now something of the general situation in order to understand what

will be expected of you. The Dervish field army is at present concentrated near the junction of the Nile and the Atbara Rivers under the command of Mahmoud and Osman Digna, the Khalifa's chief emirs. This army will be engaged by our forces in less than three weeks. While it is impossible to predict the nature of the battle or its exact location, the result is certain; the Dervish army will be destroyed.

'The survivors of the enemy's forces will retire to Omdurman. In the course of time we shall pursue them, and another and probably a final battle will be fought somewhere near that city. But some weeks, probably some months, must elapse before the fighting of this second battle. In the meantime, it is of the utmost importance that the army be furnished with the fullest possible information in regard to the state of the enemy's forces, their disposition, and his probable intentions. This information can only be secured through spies inside the enemy's lines. Native spies are untrustworthy.

'Naturally, we shall have many such agents, and they will be at all times in very imminent danger. But both for the sake of their safety and their usefulness to the army, it is better that each of them act independently. They will be provided with certain signs for communicating with each

other should it ever be found necessary, but these are only to be employed as a last extremity. You must understand that individual safety is for the army agent in a hostile city a secondary consideration. If you know that to appeal to a fellow spy may save both your lives, but may cost his as well as yours, you must remain silent.

‘Final orders will be sent to you when the time arrives. You will, of course, communicate to no one the knowledge that you are to be sent on a special mission. This pass will take you by rail to Kenur, where the army is being concentrated, and where you will find your command. That is all.’

Bob saluted, then stood motionless. Captain Gray, who had already turned to his papers, looked up and glanced at him sharply.

‘Well?’ he asked shortly.

‘I just wanted to ask what really happened this noon, sir,’ Bob said hesitatingly.

Captain Gray frowned, then his grim lips showed just the trace of a smile.

‘As frequently happens,’ he replied, ‘we caught a few wretched subordinates while the rest escaped. It’s not a good practice to ask questions,’ he added in a tone of reproof. ‘I have made an exception and answered this one because I should like the memory of to-day’s failure to remain in

your mind. You may find it useful in the future.' Again he resumed his papers, and this time Bob knew better than to risk a second question.

While he waited for any sort of train to take him to the front, he realized how completely he had been out of the real current of events during the long days when he had worked so hard — and apparently to such little purpose — under the watchful eye of Hassan, the Turkish N.C.O. On his first day as Ali Abid, the son of the Cairo tanner, the water station had been close to the army's head; now the army had gone past and the place had become the army's tail! Where there had been piles of rails, ties, and other construction material there were now great mountains of 'bully beef,' ammunition, spare wheels for the artillery, and there had been established a great remount depot, where extra horses for the cavalry and artillery were being exercised and conditioned against the need of them at the front.

And this time, instead of broiling in the sun on an open flat car throughout the entire journey, he had a seat in the corner of a regular compartment car, crowded with troops of all arms and colors, fresh drafts for some of the regiments already at the front, officers returning from short leaves in Cairo, a few white-faced men just out of hospital after a bout with fever, a few belated arrivals



joining the British regiments which had lately been added to the force.

Most amazing of all that he saw was the air of permanence about the railroad itself. He and the other members of his squad had been working like dogs providing wood and steel for the hungry construction gangs up the line, and he had not realized how many such gangs of laborers were toiling from sunrise to sunset, and how rapidly the line of steel rails was reaching out mile after mile into the desert, reducing the territory of the enemy with every square yard of the Soudan that it brought back into civilization.

It was late in the afternoon of the March day when the train — running closer to schedule than many a train in a civilized country! — dumped out its weary and dust-covered passengers in Kenur, Bob among them and feeling the dustiest of the lot. His first act upon descending from the train was to stand perfectly still and draw a long breath of astonishment and dismay.

‘If I find Peter and his men before morning, I shall be a lucky dog!’ he told himself.

Kenur, like most of the villages which border the Nile, is built in one long street close to the river, in order that all the inhabitants may have the shortest possible distance to go for water. Kenur was a good three miles long, and the orig-

inal native village had been almost completely buried from sight under the army which had swarmed down upon it like the 'plague of locusts' of Bible times. For in addition to the Egyptian and Soudanese troops there was now at the front a British brigade of four regiments, the Warwicks, the Lincolns, the Cameron Highlanders, and — these last arriving under Bob's eyes — the Seaforth Highlanders.

As he stood hesitating which direction to take, he was aware of a great crowd of troops at the river-front, where the smoke from the stacks of several river steamers was eddying in the air, and as he looked a huge band, drawn from the musicians of the different black regiments, suddenly burst into 'Hieland Laddie' and 'Annie Laurie'; then, above the music, sounded a succession of crashing cheers and up from the river came a line of big broad-shouldered men, their Lee-Metfords slanting over their shoulders, their kilts swinging around their bare knees. It was the first four companies of the Seaforths, the big Scotchmen grinning with delight that they had reached the front in time for the battle, the other troops in camp vying with each other in trying to make the reception of the famous Highland regiment as noisy and enthusiastic as they could.

Bob's eye was instantly caught and held by a

figure marching by the side of the Seaforth's colonel. This was a man standing four or five inches over six feet, slender but well-knit, deliberate and sure in his movements. Under the rim of the helmet showed a brick-red face, cold, piercing eyes under heavy brows, the firm mouth hidden under a long drooping moustache. Bob knew that he was looking for the first time at Major-General Sir Horatio Herbert Kitchener, the Sirdar, and so impressive was the huge figure in its suggestion of power, indomitable will, and a tireless energy that knew no pause until the work in hand was finished, that Bob could look at nothing else and forgot the Seaforths until after the Sirdar's towering shape had passed from view.

Then he turned and began his search for Peter's little force of unattached horse, with nothing to aid him but the information that the cavalry lines were at the far end of the *zariba* which surrounded the camp. It was a full hour later when he came upon a big man carefully shaving himself before a tiny bit of mirror fastened to the trunk of a sickly dom-palm. At the sound of Bob's steps the man turned, revealing Peter's face, the chin still covered with lather.

'Well, son, you're back in time and that's all!' he exclaimed, gripping Bob's hand. 'I had begun to believe you'd be too late for the big show, and

it's going to be one to repay old men like me for all the years we've waited to see it!

'Then I haven't missed much?' Bob asked as he sat down and Peter resumed his razor.

'You've missed a power of hard work,' the older man answered.

'But no fighting?'

'Fighting!' Peter echoed scornfully. 'Boy, you took the luck of the force with you. We've hardly laid eyes on a Dervish *gibbeh* since the day you went up the line.'



## CHAPTER X

### THE RECONNAISSANCE

OBEDIENT to a grunted order Bob swung himself into the saddle of his horse, which was no more than a blacker patch of shadow in the faint, ghostly light of early morning, reined to the left in response to another muffled command, and then asked under his breath of the man whose stirrup was almost touching his:

‘What’s up?’

‘The whole army’s out of bed before breakfast and taking us with it!’ the man answered in a sleepy grumble. ‘It was the talk in the cavalry lines last night that General Hunter was going to have a look at Mahmoud’s defenses this morning, and if that’s the truth, we’re likely to see the very inside of ’em before we get back!’

For the next half-hour Bob felt as though he were moving in a dream. The awakening from sound sleep had been so abrupt that he had performed the operations of dressing, drinking the cup of scalding coffee that was handed him, and saddling his horse without becoming thoroughly awake. And now that his senses were fully aroused he was caught up in this dim, shadowy movement

over the dark desert, where, but for the stars and the denser mass of blackness which he knew was the thick belt of almost impenetrable scrub in the direction of the river, he would not have known which way he was going.

Nor could he gain any idea of the size of the force of which he formed a part. There were sounds of movement on all sides, clinks of metal and creaks of leather which told of mounted troops, and farther away a rumble of wheels which spelled guns, but whether they were a mere hand-ful out for an early morning prowling which had no other object than to keep the men and horses fit, or, as the trooper suggested, a reconnaissance in force designed to learn the whole truth of Mahmoud's position, he could not tell.

But with the first flash of real daylight, which came with the swiftness of the tropics, he saw at a glance that the trooper had been right; the Sirdar had sent his 'sword arm,' General Hunter, with a battalion of infantry, eight squadrons of Egyptian cavalry, and eight Maxims to feel out the position behind which Mahmoud's Dervishes had been skulking all through the weary weeks of hard work while the British and their allies had been crawling toward them across the desert.

In the clear light the whole extent of the force and its dispositions were clearly revealed. Pre-

ceded by dots on the skyline which were its scouts, the cavalry was moving forward slowly in a huge fan, directly behind them the mule-drawn Maxims, still farther back, marching in a solid brown column, was the supporting battalion of infantry. The little force of Irregulars had been attached to one of the squadrons of cavalry, and its position on the extreme wing enabled Bob to look across the whole front of the force.

‘This time,’ predicted Morton, the ex-cowboy from Montana who rode at Bob’s elbow, ‘we’ll do more than take a look at ’em, as we did last time while you were gone. Old Hunter’s not the man to be satisfied with shaking his fist at Mahmoud; if he can give him a slap in the face without leaving the lot of us inside the *zariba*, he’ll do it.’

As the cavalry went forward, the men riding at ease and talking in low tones while their eyes scanned the empty land ahead of them, rumors flew thick and fast. There were those who insisted that they would find nothing ahead of them but a deserted camp, and that Mahmoud and his Baggara had stolen away days before at the first hints of the Sirdar’s advance, unwilling to risk a battle. Others spoke fearfully of the strength of the Dervish defenses and the hopeless nature of any attack upon them, even with the full force of Lord Kitchener’s army.

‘I know what I’m talking about,’ Brandt, the South African, insisted. ‘I talked with a man who’s been up to the very edge of the *zariba*. He says it’s twenty feet high and pretty near as thick, and solid thorn. You could get over a stone wall a whole lot easier. And yet it’s loose enough so there’ll be no knocking it to pieces with artillery. If the Sirdar tries to take it by storm, there won’t one of us see Cairo again. No, sir, we’re going to sit down and starve ’em out.’

A few minutes later the infantry halted — a sign that they were getting close to the Dervish position; the scouts waited for the main body to come up to them, while the wicked little Maxims trotted forward to be within hitting distance of the enemy should he decide to come out from behind his defenses and fight.

The first sight of Mahmoud’s position came unexpectedly. One moment Bob was in the bottom of a long fold of the desert and all the ground in front of him seemed empty of life; the next he was looking at a smoky black line that stood out conspicuously against a background of sickly green scrub. Not until the troops halted and he caught a glimpse of General Hunter — a short, broad-shouldered, soldierly figure — surrounded by his staff and pointing in the direction of that dark line did he realize that the black thing was Mah-



moud's *zariba*, and that he was looking for the first time at the position which was to make or break the reputation of the big silent soldier who had built a railroad to carry his army into the desert before he risked a battle.

For a little Hunter's cavalymen waited, giving the enemy a chance to show signs of life, but the distant *zariba* remained as empty of movement as the brush behind it.

'Got to go in and stir 'em up with a stick,' Morton said. 'Mahmoud's no fool. If he thinks we want nothing more than a long look from here, he'll let us take our fill of it. But if we try getting familiar, he'll come swarming out in a hurry!'

Ten minutes they waited for the Dervishes to come to life, then General Hunter straightened himself in the saddle and waved an arm. The eight squadrons went forward, broke out their columns into a wider front, with Maxims in the gaps, and trotted boldly toward the *zariba*.

Instantly the enemy gave the lie to the flying reports that the position was abandoned and that he had stolen away. As though they had been standing behind the thorny hedge waiting for the word, clouds of white-clad horsemen swarmed out into the open and swept forward. A less aggressive leader might have been satisfied with this evidence that the enemy was there and that he

meant to fight, but General Hunter had not yet seen enough to satisfy him. The cavalry continued to advance until they were within long range of the Dervishes, then halted to let the Maxims come into action.

It was precisely as though eight hoses had begun spraying bullets at the Dervishes. Even at the distance, men could be seen pitching out of their saddles, horses plunging down and carrying their riders with them. A little of this was enough for the enemy's cavalry; they were quite ready to try conclusions with the Egyptian cavalry — whom they had learned to despise — but trying to advance against Maxim fire was no work for mounted troops armed with spears and swords. Like mists suddenly struck by a strong wind the clouds of cavalry blew back and melted out of sight behind the *zariba*.

But almost before they had vanished, the plain was again covered with white figures, this time infantry. Again the Maxims rattled, and many of the bullets found their marks, although the advancing Dervishes were in open order, some of them using their rifles as they came. And presently there sounded deeper, heavier explosions as Mahmoud's men began firing their artillery.

'Time to go, now!' Morton warned Bob, as they sat their restless horses on the far edge of the

spreading line. 'He's bringing out his infantry and means business, and we've seen all we're going to see.'

Bugles at both ends of the line were now sounding the retreat, the Maxim crews, noisily cheerful over the work they had done and quite unmindful of the Dervish bullets whining overhead, were bringing up the mule teams and whisking their guns out of harm's way, when Bob, glancing behind him as the order to retire was given, saw that not all of the Dervish cavalry had fallen back under the hail of lead from the Maxims. Directly behind the right wing of Hunter's force, across their line of retreat and between them and the supporting infantry, was a mass of the white-clad horsemen.

For a few seconds Bob Sherwood experienced that sickening sense of physical fear which few men escape on the edge of their first fight in cold blood. He had already been in action twice — during the night attack on the railroad and in the little skirmish which had wiped out Layton's blacks — but this was different. Now he saw the thing coming, had to sit motionless on his horse while he watched the danger gather and sweep down upon him.

Any man with half an eye could have seen at a glance what was going to happen. The Maxims

were already clear, and the left and center of General Hunter's force were swinging back out of reach of the Dervish infantry, but the right would have to cut a path for itself, barred in one direction by the hostile cavalry and in the other by the scrub through which a man on foot could hardly force a passage and which was impossible for mounted men.

And as Bob waited, watching the ever swifter approach of the foe, he could not help remembering his childish fears and the talk of the camps. These men bearing down on them were the famous Baggara, the very pick of the Dervish troops, fearless, savage with religious frenzy and hatred of the Egyptians, and in sheer ability to handle their horses and weapons perhaps the equal of any cavalry on earth. And the men who faced them were the men whom they had always beaten — the despised *fellahin* of Egypt who had always turned tail and fled before these wild riders, and who might do it again even behind their English officers. The native troops had already proved that they would stand shell-fire and bullets, but cold steel — and that in the hands of their most dreaded foes — might prove a very different matter.

'Will they stand, do you think?' Bob asked Morton in a whisper, his eyes on the motionless



back of the nearest British officer and the staring eyes of the bugler who sat his horse beside him.

‘Can’t tell,’ answered the Montana man with an uneasy glance behind him, ‘but if they don’t, you and I are going to be food for the buzzards inside twenty minutes!’

At the same instant the officer flung up his hand, the bugler raised his instrument to his lips, and the three squadrons shook themselves into motion, trotting forward in column of fours, then wheeling into line, the Irregulars taking ground behind them. A good three horses’ length before the front rank rode Broadwood Bey, very straight in the saddle, his sword swinging easily in his right hand, turning now and then to make sure that the men he had trained were following where he led. He had deliberately risked everything on his confidence in his troopers, charging the enemy instead of dismounting his men and falling back slowly under cover of the fire from their carbines.

As they approached each other, the two bodies of horse increased their speed, and there was a flutter of red as the front ranks of the Egyptians, armed with lances like the cavalry of European armies, shifted their long weapons and lowered them for the shock of impact. From all the bugles came the stirring notes of the ‘Charge,’ and at the

same instant the Baggara swept down with a wild chorus of yells.

There followed a few seconds of headlong galloping, during which Bob watched anxiously for the first sign of faltering in the brown ranks ahead, then there was a terrific crash as the two hurtling masses met head-on, a long, uncertain interval when the force of the collision checked the first lines, brought the thundering second ranks up on their very heels and held the whole struggling mass for an instant motionless. Bob could think of nothing except the instant after the ball has been passed for a linebuck and the forwards are swaying this way and that. Then, from all sides, came a wild shout of triumph, and it was from Egyptian and not Arab throats, for the long lances had held firm and cut through the oncoming front of the Baggara like a giant spear-head, and it was the Dervishes and not their despised foes who had given way!

Like a wave striking against a rock, the cloud of white-clad horsemen split, broke this way and that, then went pelting back toward their distant lines, the exultant Egyptians shouting and stabbing behind them. Again the bugles began sounding madly, recalling the excited troopers before the elation of victory over the dreaded Baggara carried them too far and on into the reach of the

Dervish infantry. Back came the troopers, many of their lance-points tipped with red, every man of them grinning broadly. They surged round their officers, excited and eager as so many children.

'*Dushman quaiss kitir!*' Bob heard again and again — 'Very good fight! Very good fight!' — as the dark-skinned cavalrymen pressed up to shake the hands of the young Englishmen who had led them — and who were just as pleased and excited by the glorious victory as the men they had turned from hopeless, down-trodden victims into horsemen who need not fear comparison with any.

Bob saw a young subaltern, hardly more than a boy, unmindful of the blood that was still running from a hole in the shoulder of his tunic where a Dervish spear had reached him, turn in his saddle and shake his fist in the direction of the retreating Dervishes.

'And don't you forget it!' he shouted after the beaten enemy. 'We'll be back inside a week and finish the job!'

## CHAPTER XI

### THE BATTLE OF THE ATBARA

FOR three days after General Hunter's reconnaissance and the fight which had proved the mettle of the *fellahin* horse, the Anglo-Egyptian army sweltered in the camp at Umdabieh, little more than ten miles from Mahmoud's lines, polishing its weapons for the battle which was at hand after the months of patient work and waiting. The cavalry fight had taken place on April 4th; on the fifth and sixth and until the evening of the seventh the bulk of the force rested, although between them and the enemy was always a busy screen of scouts watching Mahmoud's every movement — or rather the lack of movement which proved that he was waiting to be attacked.

On the evening of the seventh, the word to advance was given. At six o'clock in the evening, the entire force moved from the scrub-surrounded camp at Umdabieh and stood in the open desert. There were four brigades in all, the British brigade consisting of the Cameron Highlanders, Seaforth Highlanders, Warwicks and Lincolns, and three Egyptian brigades commanded by Generals Macdonald, Maxwell, and Lewis, together with



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the Egyptian cavalry, Camel Corps, four batteries of field artillery, and the Maxims — a total of some twelve thousand men.

Formed in great squares, with Lewis's brigade with the water and transport in the rear, the army marched for an hour under a brilliant moon. Then a halt was called, the squares were unlocked, men and horses were taken down to the stream for water, and the men were allowed to get what sleep they could until one o'clock. Then the march was resumed and continued until four, when the squares again halted and the men were told to lie down.

Of all this night march, Bob saw almost nothing after the huge black squares of the infantry brigades had first been swallowed up by the darkness. For the Irregulars, attached to a squadron of Egyptian cavalry, at first moved out on the left flank of the army, and then by a long, swinging march across its rear and far out on the right wing.

'We'll not get much of a taste of the fighting this time,' Peter had warned Bob before they started, 'for this is to be an infantryman's battle. But we'll see it all as though we were sitting in the front row of a theater!'

When the second halt came at four in the morning, the Irregulars did not share the chance for a

bit of broken sleep, as they were pushed out a mile or more beyond the front of the resting troops as a screen against possible surprise, should Mahmoud make another mistake and attempt to strike against the force that was drawing in to crush him. Had Bob not been able to stretch out a hand and touch the butt of the carbine in its 'boot' behind his right leg or the bandoliers of cartridges across his shoulders, it would have been hard for him to realize that he was a tiny part of an army on the verge of battle, for he was far enough from the huge squares of infantry so that he heard no sounds from them, while from the direction of the Dervish position came nothing more alarming than the sleepy crowing of cocks or the occasional bray of an uneasy donkey. And the two hours passed without incident: if Mahmoud and his tribesmen knew of the danger which had crept close to them under cover of the darkness, they were trusting in the strength of their defenses and taking no precautions.

Half an hour before the sudden flood of light from the rising sun low-voiced orders were spoken and the screen of cavalry which had veiled the front of the army was brushed aside to give freedom of movement to the masses of brown and khaki-clad infantry behind them. And as the lifting shadows revealed the stage on which the

battle was to be fought, Bob saw that Peter had told little less than the truth when he said that they would have a seat in the front row.

Stretched out before him was the whole army, as clearly marked as though they had been a child's toy soldiers on the floor of a nursery, the squares of the Egyptians and Soudanese showing blacker against the yellow sand because of the darker tunics, puttees, and tarbooshes of the men, the details so plain even at a distance that he could see the bands of deeper hue which were the dark kilts of the Highland regiments far to the right. Beyond the British was the main body of cavalry; behind them, looking like a patch of thicker scrub, Lewis's brigade with the baggage. And straight ahead, less than two miles away, the dark line of Mahmoud's *zariba* against the background of green scrub, above it an eddying cloud of dust as though the Dervishes were digging fresh trenches, and near its center a group of fluttering flags of different colors.

Suddenly, like so many huge monsters moving in unison, the squares of the three brigades moved, swirled as they shifted into battle formation, and began eating up the ground between them and the *zariba*. Bob held his breath, waiting for the deluge of fire from the Dervish lines, but nothing happened; the whole vast movement con-

tinued in a silence as complete as though the thousands of moving figures had been so many ghosts. Yard after yard the brown tide rolled across the desert until no more than eight hundred yards separated them from their goal, then halted; still no fire from the enemy's lines!

With a heavy thud, startling after the unbroken silence, the first gun spoke, just as the watches of the officers marked a few minutes after six, and a few seconds afterwards a distant pop and a little puff of gray vapor showed where the shell had burst on the *zariba*. Then, from the four British batteries on left and right, the guns began a steady hammering that lasted without interruption for an hour and twenty minutes. At such a range and with so large a target few shots went wild; shell after shell exploded in the *zariba*, which was set on fire in several places, and the whiter puffs above the Dervish position marked where the shrapnel was bursting and sending down its hail of bullets on the defenders.

Never did an army give a finer exhibition of sheer physical courage than Mahmoud's half-savage warriors. They had no artillery good enough to answer this overwhelming fire; they must by this time have realized that they were as helpless before the advancing flood as though it had been the waters of an ocean instead of an



army of men, and yet they held their ground without a hint of breaking, saving their ammunition until their assailants came to closer quarters. Bob could see tiny figures moving about under the merciless deluge of shells, seemingly as unconcerned as though the flying metal was a shower of rain.

Only once did the enemy threaten to strike back. A few minutes after the bombardment opened, clouds of the Dervish cavalry came pouring out from behind the *zariba*, forming as though to move against the Egyptian cavalry, but preparations had been taken in advance against just such an event, and as the Baggara horsemen began to advance, they were met by an angry rat-tat-tat! and a stream of bullets from the Maxims. They had tasted this bitter medicine four days earlier and had no stomach to face it a second time. They melted back, vanished, and were not seen again.

Abruptly as they had begun, the guns ceased firing, the gun teams trotted up from the hollows where they had been waiting, and at the same instant the bugles rang out and the whole army began its final advance. For an instant Bob heard the wild, skirling music of the Highland bagpipes, a blare of brass from other parts of the line, a medley of shrill cries from the blacks and a

deeper-throated cheer from the distant British, then these sounds were blotted out by the measured crash of firing as the advancing troops halted to drive home volley after volley. In front of the Egyptian and black troops, whose older Martinis used black powder, a cloud of yellow-gray powder smoke gathered, while above the British the smokeless cartridges of the Lee-Metfords made no more than a gray haze.

Not for so much as the fraction of a second did Bob feel the slightest doubt as to the result: it had seemed inevitable since his first glimpse of the waiting army and the silent *zariba*. And as soon as the army began to move, this feeling increased. He seemed to be watching, not an army made up of men like himself, but a relentless and perfectly oiled machine which could not be stopped by any human power. When he saw that men were actually falling in the advancing lines, the spectacle surprised him, for it seemed as though the long bombardment and then the machine-like volleys must fairly have destroyed the Dervishes before they could fire a shot.

He did not witness the actual assault upon the *zariba* — though he learned afterwards that the great hedge of thorns had proved a far less formidable barrier than had been feared — because the watchful eyes of the officers saw that the work

of the artillery and infantry was about finished and that the moment for the waiting cavalry had come. There was another shrilling of bugles, and from both ends of the line clouds of horsemen began spurring down toward the Dervish position to complete the work of destruction — for every white-clad figure which fell on the banks of the dried-up river Atbara meant one less man who would reach the Khalifa's army in far-off Omdurman!

What followed was not a pleasant memory for any man who took part in it, but against such foes as the Dervishes it was a grim necessity. The enemy did not really begin to fight until the *zariba* had been pierced in many places, and the area inside it — a perfect labyrinth of straw huts, twisting entrenchments, and half-hidden rifle-pits — fairly alive with their white, brown, and black-skinned assailants. Then they fought with the blind courage of brave men who knew that their struggle was hopeless, seeking only to kill as many of the victors as they could before they died. They gave no quarter and expected none, striking as long as they had the strength to pull trigger or thrust a spear. And it was unsafe to turn one's back on a wounded Dervish, because if there was a weapon within his reach he would use it.

Bob and his companions of the Irregulars did not get into the thick of this hand-to-hand *mêlée* inside the *zariba*, for the ground was too broken and dangerous for horses, but he saw enough of it in the open ground between the rear of the *zariba* and the half-dry bed of the Atbara with its long pools of stagnant water, across which the Dervishes were pelting in their disorganized flight. Half-sickened by what he saw, and only able to do his part in the terrible business because of that wild excitement which carries a man through such fighting, he kept his horse close to the heels of Peter's big black stallion, trying not to see the defenseless men who had flung away their weapons and were dashing headlong for the comparative safety beyond the river, and firing only at those who still showed fight. But the folly of being merciful was proved to him when he saw a boy, who could not have been more than ten or twelve years old, standing beside a body which was probably that of his father or some near relative, suddenly stoop down, pick up a great elephant-gun which lay on the ground, and fire it at the nearest trooper. The recoil of the huge weapon knocked the child over as though he had been hit with a club and the bullet flew harmlessly overhead, but the incident was enough to show the spirit of the Dervishes, when even the children



had no more fear of death than as though they did not know the meaning of the word.

How long this went on Bob had no idea, but finally the shrill whistles of the officers began sounding 'Cease firing!' regiments which had become mixed up in the fight within the *zariba* began disentangling themselves, and the cavalry swung off toward the river to keep an eye on the straggling remnants of the broken enemy and see that he did not turn back. The battle was over, and the face of Bob's watch showed him that only forty minutes had passed since his ear caught the sound of the Highland pipes and he saw the army sweep forward to the attack!

Nearly an hour later, as the Irregulars and the squadron to which they had been attached throughout the action were falling back past the *zariba* to join the main force of cavalry, they witnessed the final scene in the bloody drama of the morning.

On a little rise of ground, no more than a couple of hundred yards from the point where the bare-kneed Camerons had gone through the frail barrier of thorns, Bob caught the flicker of the Sirdar's red-and-white flag, and saw the tall, commanding figure of Lord Kitchener standing a little in advance of a group of his officers. Moving toward them, surrounded by some men of the Tenth

Soudanese, strode a tall, dark man with the long, narrow face of an Arab, his white *gibbeh* edged with gold.

'Cracky!' exclaimed Morton at Bob's elbow, 'it's the old he-one himself! Those niggers have bagged Mahmoud!'

They were close enough so that Bob could see the features of the two men as conqueror and conquered faced each other, and he saw that Mahmoud carried himself as proudly as the man who had crushed him, and that his eyes met Lord Kitchener's without wavering.

'Are you the man Mahmoud?' the Sirdar asked in Arabic.

'Yes,' answered the prisoner, 'I am Mahmoud, and I am the same as you,' by which he meant that he too was a commander-in-chief.

'Why did you come here to make war?' was the next question.

Again the Dervish leader answered unflinchingly and with flashing eyes:

'I came because I was told — the same as you!'

The Sirdar made a gesture of dismissal and Mahmoud was led away, his chin still lifted, his eyes shooting scorn at the men who surrounded him.

'Take a lot of licking yet, those chaps, before we're through with them,' Morton prophesied.

Bob looked up to see a mounted trooper speaking to Peter, and the latter turned and summoned him with a crooked finger.

'You're to report to Colonel Wingate's headquarters at once for special duty, Sherwood,' Peter said. 'Go now; this man will conduct you.'

There was no time for speech between them, but in Peter's eyes Bob saw a look that was at once 'good-bye' and an unspoken prayer for his safety. He clucked to his horse and followed the trooper.

In the excitement and activity of the last few days he had almost forgotten the part he was still to play. For most of the army there would come now a time of waiting and rest. The men would go into summer quarters, officers on leave to Cairo or even to England. But for the Intelligence there would be no rest, and Bob had become one of the tiny feelers of that silent, never-sleeping organization. While other men went home to rest, he, disguised as a Dervish, perhaps alone, would be making his way to that mysterious desert stronghold of Omdurman, where the dreaded Dervish power still lay unbroken!

## CHAPTER XII

### INTO THE DESERT

SHORTLY after dawn, some six weeks after the battle of the Atbara had been fought and won, a small party of mounted men left the outposts of the Anglo-Egyptian army and began the long march over the two hundred-odd miles of desert which lay between the half-dry Atbara and the Dervish capital.

There was nothing about the party to distinguish it from the hundreds of other wandering groups moving about the pillaged, war-scoured country, save perhaps the facts that its members were better armed and were provided with a larger number of baggage animals, and that there were no women and children among them. They might have been a party of Jaalin or one of the other friendly tribes — or they might have been one of the many small fragments of Mahmoud's broken army. There were five of the horsemen, carrying the usual spears or swords of the Dervish cavalry, but armed as well either with Martini carbines or with service revolvers, and a string of half a dozen mules followed the horses, piled high with baggage. But in the entire outfit there was



not a single detail of equipment — not so much as a strap of harness leather or a tin of 'bully beef' — to show that the party had come from the British lines. The weapons and ammunition might have been captured, as was the case with most of the rifles possessed by the Dervishes.

And it would have taken a sharper and more suspicious eye than any they were likely to encounter — at least until they were much closer to the capital or some larger and better organized body of the enemy — to mark the man who rode at the head of the little column as anything but the young tribesman he appeared to be. And aside from the completeness of his disguise, Bob Sherwood was a far more useful member of the Intelligence forces than he had been when he stained his skin and tried to forget his knowledge of English for the first time.

He was not groping in the dark as he had been during those long days and nights with the Labor Battalion sweltering on the bank of the Nile; he knew definitely what he had been sent to find and the available means through which he might hope for success. And, although it was clear that the dangers of this second and far more important venture were infinitely greater, they were much less in his thoughts.

If he had been captured by a party of the ene-

emy, stripped to the skin and searched, nothing of a suspicious nature would have been found upon him, and yet he carried, graven so deep in his memory that there was no danger of his forgetting any detail, all the information with which his superiors had been able to furnish him in advance.

Woven somewhere through the fabric of the Dervish plans which had culminated in this latest attempt against Egypt there ran a thread of white man's scheming. How wide and how strong this thread was, to what extent it was responsible for the persistence of the Dervishes, and how far it should be regarded by the English as a source of danger — these were the facts which he had been sent out to discover. Circumstances had already given him some faint idea of how this unknown and unmeasured power was working, since chance had already brought him close to it several times. The unsolved mystery of his father's death, the white face seen in the engine cab during the raid on the railroad, the thwarted conspiracy among the black laborers — all these queer happenings, which were undoubtedly connected, had come close to him and given him glimpses of dark movements of which most of the army was wholly unaware. And the branch of the army which he was serving had been unable to supply him with any great amount of help.

‘It’s quite possible,’ he had been told, ‘that you can accomplish little or nothing. Omdurman may be quite the wrong place in which to hunt for the beginnings of these threads. The head of the plot may be in Cairo, in some dirty little dramshop on the Marseilles water-front, in Paris — even in London. Or it may be in the galvanized-iron shed of one of these Greek merchants who have set up their shops behind our own forces. Other men are working with their noses to the ground in all those places; you’ll have to smell your way through the dirty kennels of Omdurman.’

What they had been able to give him (though, of course, he dared carry no record of it!) was a knowledge of the British secret agents already within the Dervish capital, some notion of where they were to be found and how recognized, and the little bit of definite information which had trickled to headquarters from these scattered sources. But even here there was vagueness and uncertainty.

‘All of this news is old,’ Headquarters had admitted, ‘and a good part of it may be untrustworthy. Most of our men are natives, and you know what that means. They may have been frightened into confession, may have been ferreted out and killed, may have gone over to the enemy of their own choice. The presence of those

men in Omdurman may have accomplished nothing more than to put the enemy on his guard and make it certain that you'll be bagged before you set foot in the city. On the other hand, they may have done a good bit to make your job easier. There's no telling. A fog of silence and mystery has hung about that unclean city ever since it was built, and there's mighty little truth ever filters through it.'

The four men who rode at his heels would be of no assistance to him when the really serious part of his work commenced — in fact, they would not even be with him at that time. It had been impossible to make any exceptions to the rule of deception; his companions did not know that there was a white skin beneath the double layer of tan and stain. He spoke their tongue — they had been carefully selected so that there would be no trouble on this point — confessed to a life spent mostly in the cities where the white man's word was law, and was leading them on a long scouting expedition of some sort, concerning whose nature they were not curious since their pay was excellent and the work did not promise to be hard. If they had known that the man they followed so confidently planned to set them adrift to find their way back to the army when he was within a day or two of the capital, they might have begun



wondering what it all meant. But of course they had no suspicion of this. Their leader had little to say, rode for the most part wrapped in his own thoughts, but he evidently knew his business, pushed them hard, but not too hard, and kept them well fed, so they accepted their lot with the uncomplaining indifference characteristic of their race.

Bob had no complaint to make of the long hours of silence, broken only by the sound of hoofs and the infrequent, muttered speech of the men behind him. He had been saddled by no definite instructions; his plan of operations had been left to his own devising. What his superiors desired was information, and they did not care how it was secured. This was, for a man young and vigorous enough to love adventure for its own sake, an extremely satisfactory arrangement, yet not without its defects. He could lay as many plans as he chose; the trouble was to tell which one of them contained the greatest promise of success. For he did not possess even those advantages enjoyed by the spies employed in wars between civilized countries. If he had, for instance, been a disguised Italian going into Austria, he would have been able to study an authentic map of Vienna until he knew in detail the arrangement of the city. But there wasn't such a thing in existence

as a sketch-map of Omdurman: he had no more notion of exactly what he should find than as though his objective was a city which he had seen only in his dreams!

For several days after setting out, there was nothing to interrupt his thoughts. The country through which they were traveling was a desert in more senses than one. In the days before religious frenzy laid the foundations of the Dervish power, the Soudan had been a fairly populous and happy region, but after nearly a score of years of Dervish domination it had been turned into a gaunt and gloomy wilderness, where almost the only signs of human life were the scars of cruel warfare — most of them old and half-buried under the drifting sand, but with a few still fresh. Since no native village had been safe from the raiding Baggara, the villages had ceased to exist, the attempts at cultivation in the irrigated patches of land close to the Nile and in the oases deeper in the desert had been abandoned, and human life, over regions hundreds of miles in extent, had ceased to be.

As he rode hour after hour, slack in the saddle, his eyes half-closed against the brilliant glare of sunlight, Bob formulated one plan of campaign after another, studying and discarding details, trying to hit upon some scheme which seemed

likely to work no matter what circumstances he encountered. And in the end he came back to the idea which had suggested itself when he first began to study the problem — that he could really decide nothing at all until the journey was over, his men dismissed, and himself actually inside the hostile city.

For the sake of continuing the necessary hoodwinking of his own men he made a great show of questioning the few miserable bands of wandering desert-folk which they encountered during the first days of their long march, choosing his words so that it appeared that he had been sent out only to learn the true strength of the remaining Dervish armies, their probable location, and the length of time in which they could be gathered and set in the field to face the victors of the Atbara.

Had these really been his only objects, he must have given up his quest and turned back in despair at the end of the first three days, for such replies as he was able to wring from the wretched people he encountered would have been of no value whatsoever. These hunted creatures were so weakened by privation and terror that it was a good deal of a triumph to make them talk at all, and when they were induced to answer, their desire to please the armed men who had stopped them made them give the answers they thought

most likely to find favor, with no regard at all for the truth. Furthermore, the average wandering Arab has little or no idea either of numbers or distance. If Bob had sat down and attempted to sift the truth out of the tales his questionings had brought, he would have abandoned the task as hopeless, for the answers he got placed the strength of the main Dervish army at anywhere between a handful and a hundred thousand and located it at a dozen different points scattered over five thousand square miles of desert!

A week passed, during which the little party put from twenty to thirty miles a day behind it with clock-like regularity, keeping close to the Nile for the most part, but occasionally pushing farther into the desert. And for seven days nothing happened beyond the infrequent meetings with wandering natives. The loaded rifles of the men began to seem so much useless baggage, for there had never been a shadow of an excuse to pull them from their leather sheaths. If any of the cloaked and hooded horsemen they met had actually taken part in the battle on the Atbara, the fight had all gone out of them for the time being.

There was nothing about the eighth day of the march to suggest that it would prove any different from those which had preceded it. After an uneventful night (during which Bob had a strong



notion that the successive men on picket had slept soundly at their posts!) breakfast was eaten and camp struck before daylight. Silently as usual they mounted and started, Bob riding alone a few yards ahead of his men. For three hours they rode through an empty landscape, the green scrub along the river a dim line far to their left, on the right the desert skyline obscured by dancing heat-mirages. Presently, no more than tiny dots in the distance, appeared a little cluster of human figures. Bob studied them through the glass which he carried hidden under the folds of his flowing garments and made out a dozen men, above the heads of some of them little glints of light which he knew were spear-points. Instantly he halted his men and issued orders.

One man was instructed to ride with the pack-mules, keeping in sight of his companions, but re-joining them only in case of apparent danger. The other three, using Bob as their 'guide' upon the left, were to spread out, a full quarter-mile of hot sand between each man and the next, and follow the distant horsemen, never coming too close, yet never losing sight of them. In case the men they followed turned and showed signs of attacking, the three men were to fall back on Bob as a rallying-point, and the four of them would wait for the arrival of the fifth and the baggage animals.

‘Remember,’ Bob cautioned them, ‘there is to be no firing without my orders. All that we seek to learn is where these men are going and whether they will be joined by others. We are now the eyes of the army, not its arms!’

As a matter of fact, Bob hadn’t the slightest interest in the distant horsemen, beyond an eagerness to keep far enough away from them to avoid all risk of a collision, but he reasoned that his little command was better off going through the motions of scout duty than in simply following at his heels while their slow curiosity (and perhaps their suspicions of his business) came gradually to life. So he took pains to see that the distance between himself and the far-off knot of Dervishes was not much decreased, and that his men obeyed orders and governed their pace by his. Satisfied on these points, he relapsed into the speculations on his future movements which occupied so much of his time and paid no attention to his surroundings, beyond an occasional quick glance at the tiny white figures moving across the immense yellow floor of the desert.

His first warning of approaching trouble came when he looked up to assure himself that the nearest of his men was maintaining his proper distance, only to find that the rider had vanished completely. His first thought was that the man

had dropped from sight for an instant behind a fold of the ground, but a second glance showed him what had happened. Between him and the point at which the nearest man had disappeared was a dun-colored belt which looked at first like the floor of the desert, only to be revealed on closer inspection as a growing cloud of flying sand.

To one hardened to desert travel, there is nothing particularly terrifying about a sandstorm, unless it is one of unusual severity and long duration, yet at the best it means a period of sharp discomfort, when for the time being all sense of direction is lost and travel toward a given point is out of the question. But now the matter was more serious. Bob's preoccupation had kept him from noticing the approach of the storm until it was fairly upon him, and there was no chance of rallying his men before the whirling clouds of sand would have engulfed them.

'As a chief of scouts, I've certainly made a sorry show of myself!' he muttered in disgust, as he took the one course left open to him, putting his horse to a lope and taking the direction which should bring him closer to his men. 'With luck I'll come through this mess without loss, but if luck should break against me, I'm likely to find myself without a command or supplies, and too close for comfort to that outfit ahead of us.'

He had some hopes that he might reach the nearest of his men ahead of the swirling dust, but a couple of minutes of headlong galloping brought no sign of the horseman, and with a sudden whoop the storm was upon him and the visible world blotted out of existence. To face it was a physical impossibility; all that he could do was to turn his back, protect his face as well as he could with the hood of his *burnoose*, and leave the rein slack on his horse's neck until the storm had blown itself out.

But this was precisely what the storm seemed to have no immediate intention of doing. The wind increased instead of diminishing, the volume of sand in the air increased until breathing itself was difficult and it became as dark as a late winter afternoon in America. Realizing that every added moment of the storm increased the danger that his five men and the precious pack-mules might become hopelessly scattered, Bob urged his horse into motion now and then, and, shielding his eyes as well as he could, tried to pierce the whirling yellow walls which surrounded him on all sides. But these repeated efforts gained nothing except to punish his eyes until it was almost impossible to open them at all, fill his mouth and nose with dust, and prove that he was unable to see a dozen feet into the stinging fog of sand.



‘If this doesn’t lift inside ten minutes, it isn’t going to be funny,’ he muttered. ‘The men were all out of touch with each other, unless they saw this coming before I did, and they were almost as close to the Dervishes as they were to me. I think the safest plan will be for me to stand perfectly still and wait.’

He dismounted, covered his face almost completely, and stood perfectly still save when he was compelled to move a few paces to quiet the increasing restlessness of his tormented horse. Two or three times the intensity of the storm decreased a bit, and once he got a fleeting glimpse of the sun, but almost immediately afterward it grew darker than ever and he thought that the wind took on an added degree of violence.

A glance at his watch told him nothing, as he had no idea how long the storm had already lasted. He felt sure that at least half an hour had passed, and that thirty minutes of such buffeting might have been sufficient to turn what might have been no more than an uncomfortable annoyance into a veritable disaster. If his men had been regular troopers, thoroughly accustomed to discipline and to dependence on their officers in a crisis, he would not have been greatly worried. But they were nothing more than half-wild tribesmen, serving the army because it brought them

surer food and greater safety; they had no idea — as far as he could tell — that he was a white man and he had no notion how trustworthy they might prove in a pinch. That they might use the storm as a blessing from Allah under which they might steal the baggage animals and vanish into the desert was a very real and decidedly ugly possibility.

When a distinct lessening of the wind encouraged him to uncover his face, and he saw unmistakable signs that the full fury of the storm had passed, Bob's watch told him that twenty-five minutes had passed since he had dismounted. This meant that his men and the Dervishes they had been slowly following had been hidden from his sight for something like a full hour, and in that time each of them might have wandered several miles. If they had taken different directions, or all five of them got together by some instinct surer than his own and then blundered farther from him instead of working closer, they might be out of sight, in which case nothing but sheer chance would ever give him another glimpse of them.

Calling himself hard names for failing to provide means of rallying in just such a case, he climbed into the saddle, shaking himself like a dog to free himself of his burden of sand.

'I'd feel a lot happier if the next two hours were over !' he confessed, speaking the words aloud and in English as he swung himself into the saddle.

Then, before he could urge his horse to motion, an object seen through the thinning fog of sand made him check the beast with a muttered exclamation of surprise. Sitting motionless in the saddle not a dozen yards away from him was a mounted man, and angling up over his white-clad shoulder was a long, iron-tipped spear, which marked him as a Dervish and not one of Bob's vanished followers!

## CHAPTER XIII

### ALI KEREB

AT sight of the silent, menacing figure Bob's impulse was to reach for the carbine at his saddle-bow or the heavy Webley service-revolver which he wore in a holster underneath his white robe. He did actually lift one hand, but checked himself in time and raised it in a gesture of salute.

'God is kind to me after all,' he said in Arabic. 'I had given myself up for lost in the storm.'

The man made no answer, did not so much as stir in the saddle, but sat watching Bob out of a pair of sharp and suspicious eyes, the one conspicuous feature of his dark face, whose other features were hidden by a great, square-cut black beard and a bristling moustache. The heads of the two horses were almost touching before he spoke.

'A man whose daring has won him an English rifle should have no fear of sand storms,' he said coldly.

'In such times,' Bob answered, trying to imitate the unemotional, fatalistic tone of the Arab, 'one uses such weapons as he can find. The dead Inglesi from whom I took this gun will never miss



it. And does it matter in the sight of the Prophet what weapons the Faithful use? Shall I scorn a good gun because the hands of an infidel have soiled it?’

Again the dark horseman was silent, and again he subjected Bob to a glance so searching, so plainly suspicious that it was not easy to bear.

‘You travel alone, since the storm terrified you?’ he asked.

Bob raised his hands in a gesture of helpless uncertainty, but at the same time his quick eye made a hurried inspection of the skyline, now clear for the most part save in the direction where the yellow-brown wall of the sandstorm was growing smaller in the distance. There was not a sign of his own men, but two hundred yards beyond the horseman who had appeared so suddenly out of the dust he saw the man’s companions, dismounted and watching them closely.

The storm had whisked his men out of reach as completely as though they had been so many bits of rubbish driven before the wind, and at the same time blown him into the very midst of the little band of Dervishes he had been avoiding with so much caution. And yet, even while his eyes scanned the desert and he searched for words in which to answer the sharp question, he realized that the blast might after all prove anything but

the ill wind it appeared. It might prove easier to explain a single wanderer, well armed with captured British weapons, than it would have been to account for five of them — supplied with plenty of food and baggage animals as well; and he hastily concocted a story which he believed might be more readily accepted than the one he would have had to tell had he appeared with four more rifles at his back.

‘For six days,’ he said, ‘I have been no better than a leaf blown by the winds. Sometimes I have been alone, sometimes there were others with me, but they were strangers. One night I slept in a ruined hut, the other five under the stars. Where I shall lay my head to-night, Allah only knows?’

‘Which way do you travel?’

‘To Omdurman.’

‘You have business there?’

‘Can a soldier of the Khalifa go elsewhere?’ Bob asked in seeming surprise. ‘I fought against the Inglesi at the Atbara; all that I ask is a chance to fight against them again.’

At this the man’s eyes left Bob’s face and went to the horse he was riding. This gave Bob no uneasiness, for the animal was one captured during the battle, and there was not a detail of its trappings which would betray him as anything but what he pretended to be. Evidently satisfied by

his swift inspection, the man looked up and spoke in a somewhat friendlier tone.

‘We too go toward the capital,’ he said, ‘but our business presses and there can be no delay. If your horse can keep pace, your way may be ours until we reach the city. Otherwise you must shift for yourself, for we cannot wait.’

‘I am content,’ Bob answered instantly, ‘since all that I require is food enough to give me strength that I may travel with all speed.’

Within a few moments the little band had resumed its journey, and a passer-by would have observed no differences between the latest addition to its numbers and the other members. Beyond the exchange of those grave, courteous salutations which are the mark of the Arab whether he is a wealthy chieftian or a penniless cut-throat, the men paid the newcomer little or no attention, evidently deciding that if his answers had satisfied their leader he was no fit subject for their own curiosity. And Bob discovered that the promise of speed had been no empty one. Whether the band feared pursuit or was hastening to some concentration of forces nearer to the capital, he had no means of guessing, but they were certainly in a great hurry, for they put their horses to the best pace which they could hope to maintain for any considerable length of time, and men who ride

in haste and know that they must keep it up for days have little time or inclination for speech.

It had been no more than the middle of the forenoon when the unexpected sandstorm had so completely changed Bob's plans, and there were no breaks in the monotony of the day's travel save those that were necessary for resting the horses and the two hours or so of rest in the middle of the day when even the most hardened desert dwellers surrender for a little while to the dominion of the broiling Soudan sun. Even during this halt there was no break in the silence. The men curled themselves up and slept in what shade they could find and make, and Bob was left to his own devices.

But when the day's march was finally ended — a full three hours after darkness had fallen on the desert — there was a little time of relaxation, and Bob began to feel that he was traveling with human beings and not merely speechless desert ghosts. Like all good horsemen, the men gave their first care to the horses, then a fire was lighted, pleasant odors of stewing meat began to arise from a steaming kettle, and there was an increasing murmur of speech.

Bob expected further questioning from the leader of the party, and rather looked forward to it, for the man seemed an unusual type and might easily prove a source of valuable information if he



could ever be induced to answer questions instead of asking them. But the bearded figure, once he had satisfied his hunger, drew to one side and sat alone, rolling and smoking cigarettes one after another, paying no attention to the storm-driven recruit who had joined his force and leaving his casual examination in the hands of his men.

The latter showed a curiosity very different from the lack of interest which they had manifested during the day, and were quite frank and open in their answers when Bob grew inquisitive in turn. They had taken no part in the battle on the Atbara or in the long weeks of desultory skirmishing which had gone before it, and they listened with great eagerness to Bob's description of the fight around Mahmoud's *zariba*, asking him childish questions as to the numbers, appearance, courage, and fighting-powers of the white-skinned invaders of their dominions. Bob had to step warily as he talked, had to remember that his account of the battle must be colored by the natural feelings of an Arab who still hated and despised the men who had beaten him, and that whatever else he did he must pretend that the victory of the Anglo-Egyptian army had been little more than a piece of bad luck and that in the end the invaders would be swept northward until they were driven into the sea over which they had sailed to Africa.

They had no tales of battle and disaster with which to match his, although they were ready enough to talk. They were for the most part of the Kababish Arabs, living near the Libyan Desert near the far edges of the territory over which the Dervish sway had been established, yet Ali Kereb, their leader, was not one of their own number, nor did they know much of him save that he seemed a man of iron, tireless in the saddle, saying little but seeing everything, prodigiously strong and brave enough to fight a lion single-handed. As to the services they had performed under him, they seemed a little vague and uneasy, avoiding direct answers, shrugging their shoulders and glancing under their brows at the tall figure smoking its cigarettes on the far edge of the circle of firelight.

‘It is a strange business,’ one of them said in a low tone, bending toward Bob as he spoke, ‘and not fit work for men who are as good fighting stuff as any in the Khalifa’s armies. Always we are in the saddle, always in haste as you have seen to-day, always hoping that fighting will be our portion as it has been that of our more fortunate brothers, yet always finding disappointment.’

‘But if it isn’t fighting that keeps you on the move, what is it?’ Bob asked with a trace of eagerness he could not wholly conceal.

The man looked at his companions and shook his head.

'I cannot tell you,' he answered. 'I think that we carry messages and receive them, but who sends them and who hears the words spoken we do not know. We ride like the wind for many hours, then we halt — it may be in a village, it may be on the open desert in the middle of the night — and Ali Kerek rides on alone. Whom he sees and what speech they have together is not shown us. He returns and again we ride like the wind.'

'Would it not be possible to follow him and discover?' Bob asked.

The man frowned and his voice dropped still lower.

'I should as soon think of climbing a tree bare-handed after a leopard as to follow Ali Kerek unbidden,' he confessed, and by the expressions on their faces, the other men indicated that they shared this opinion.

One by one the men left their places in the circle about the flickering fire and became motionless shapes stretched on the ground in the shadows beyond. Bob was about to join them when Ali Kerek, who had for the past half-hour been sitting motionless as a statue, suddenly raised his head and summoned him by a commanding gesture. Bob rose (heartily wishing that he knew a

little more about the exact relations between the men and their commander), crossed to where Ali Kereb sat, and stood awaiting further orders. The Arab pointed to the ground at his side.

‘Sit down!’ he ordered briefly, then resumed his cigarette as though Bob had ceased to exist.

Fully three minutes passed before the Arab spoke again; then there began the series of questions which Bob had expected from the first. But before he had answered more than the first two or three, he realized that his examination was not to be the simple affair which he had anticipated. Ali Kereb had a mind very different from those possessed by his followers, filled with anything but their simple curiosity about the English and child-like wonder at Bob’s answers. He asked clear-cut, definite questions, and did not betray by so much as the flicker of an eyelid the effect which the replies had upon him.

Luckily for Bob, he was by no means wholly unfamiliar with the sort of ordeal through which he was now called upon to pass. He had been through something very much like it when called ‘on the carpet’ before the head master of the New York prep school, the oral examinations of his swift four years and college — and he had witnessed the same process as an outsider when he had listened to the questioning of natives brought



to the Intelligence Headquarters. He saw his danger before he had spoken a dozen sentences — the danger of telling too much, of betraying a greater and more understanding knowledge of the events in which he had taken part than a desert Arab could be expected to possess. Whether Ali Kereb suspected him or was only anxious to get all the information he could, Bob was unable to guess, but this made no difference; the danger of saying too much was just as great in one case as the other.

Yet, in spite of all his caution, it was pure luck which saved him from discovery, pure luck in the shape of a sand-flea which had worked its way inside his clothes and set about its uncomfortable activities on his skin!

Just at the instant when the tiny insect made his presence on Bob's leg known by a sharp, stinging itch, the Arab, who had been silent for nearly a minute, said suddenly in perfect English:

'There is no use in further pretense. I know what you are!'

If the words had been spoken half a second sooner, they must have proved Bob's undoing. Braced against possible surprise as he had been, he knew that he could not have prevented some flicker of understanding if he had heard the English words while his own eyes were fixed by the

other man's burning gaze. But at that precise instant he had bent his head, stretched out his hand, and casually scratched the ankle where the flea had bitten him. And, though his blood was racing so hard through his veins that it seemed to him that the roaring of it must be audible, his features were under perfect control and his face blank of all expression save a dull wonder when he looked up.

'That sounds,' he said indifferently, 'like the strange speech of the Inglesi which I do not understand.'

Ali Kereb stared at him intently, then flicked away the end of his cigarette, which made a curving red line through the darkness, and said in curt dismissal:

'Enough. You may go.'

Tired as he was, Bob lay awake for a long time. The sandstorm had certainly been a stroke of luck after all, since it had sent him across the path of one of these mysterious disguised whites among the Dervish forces for whom he might otherwise have searched in vain for weeks. It had also furnished him with safe-conduct to the Dervish capital — provided he managed to maintain his disguise under Ali Kereb's vigilance. He would have been more fearful on this point had he not felt that the narrow escape had given him at least

a temporary advantage. To know that he was suspected and watched would put him doubly on his guard. So, when he finally closed his eyes, it was with the feeling that sticking his head into the very jaws of the lion had really increased his safety.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE SHADOWY CARAVAN

FOR the next few days nothing happened to Bob except that each night found him a round number of miles nearer his goal, and his weary body protested in slightly less degree against the number of hours on end which it had been compelled to sit in the saddle. He had no further speech with Ali Kereb, who rode at the head of the column, wrapped in his own thoughts, nor could he see that he was being subjected to any marked scrutiny. The black-bearded leader seemed to take the unhesitating, blind obedience of all his men for granted, and paid far less attention to them than he did to the horses.

Bob made gradual progress toward intimate relations with the other men, although he saw that little was to be gained from this, beyond the addition of a few words to his Arabic vocabulary and the added ease of speech which comes from long practice. They were a simple, straightforward lot, who had no particular interest in the war against the Egyptians and their white allies.

‘It is right that a man should go frequently into battle,’ one of them told Bob during a short mid-



day halt, 'but there can be too much fighting. If this lasts too long, even the subjects of the Khalifa will begin to murmur, since in many places the people are starving.'

Relieved of anxiety on the score of his own safety, Bob devoted himself to watching Ali Kereb, but was forced to admit that he might just as well have watched the Sphinx itself. This man, with the watchful eyes and the tongue which could speak excellent English when it chose, rode all day without turning his head save when he gave orders for the brief halts, and slept at night as soundly as any of his men the instant he had satisfied himself that the lone sentry had been posted. And yet Bob had it on the testimony of the men that Ali Kereb moved always at top speed, yet never led them against the enemy, and that the ends and objects of these long rides were always hidden in mystery.

'What wouldn't I give if my luck would carry me a little farther and give me a single glimpse of the truth!' was Bob's thought a hundred times a day. 'What is the truth, anyhow? Is Ali Kereb a white man, or just an Arab with an unusually active brain and a good knowledge of English? Is he part of a secret organization which is a part of the Dervish strength, or just an independent slave-trader or something of the sort using his command

for his own ends? I'm beginning to think that my dull wits will never take me to the bottom of the matter.'

And yet, as so frequently happens, he was close to his first real plunge into the depths of the mystery at the very moment when he felt most dubious about penetrating it at all.

Four days of merciless hard riding had brought the party so far on its way that Bob knew one or at most two more such forced marches must bring them in sight of the capital, when, late in the afternoon, they wheeled sharply to the right and proceeded at undiminished pace in a direction which was taking them farther and farther from Omdurman. Bob seemed to be the only one surprised by this sudden movement; the other men were evidently so accustomed to such proceedings that the change of direction caused no surprise even though it took place almost in sight of the supposed end of their journey.

'Such things have happened before,' the man to whom Bob spoke replied in a tone of complete indifference when Bob expressed his surprise at the move. 'We shall ride like this until after dark, then we shall make camp. After that he will leave us . . .' and he finished with an eloquent shrug.

That the man's prophecy was born of long ex-

perience was proved by the course of events. They followed the new route at a more deliberate pace until an hour after the sun had dropped below the rim of the earth and the sudden African darkness had descended, then made camp as usual.

As soon as the brief evening meal had been eaten, Bob drew to one side and lay down, his brain busy. There could be no doubt that chance had brought him closer to the mystery within a few days than his own efforts could have managed in a month. Yet merely to get close was of no practical value, and the next step was one before which he hesitated. Did he dare follow Ali Kereb when that lonely figure mounted his horse and rode off into the night? Was it what would be expected of him by the men who had sent him on this hazardous mission, or a foolhardy flinging away of the chance for observation which had so unexpectedly dropped into his hands?

As he lay staring up at the brilliant stars of the southern sky, he tried to estimate the possible chances of success, to guess the likely consequences of such a move. He had to admit that the odds were overwhelmingly against him. He could not leave the encampment without being observed. There might be no effort to stop him, but his companions would know that he had gone, and they would know why. Even if he won clear of the

camp, it was a hundred to one that he could not follow Ali Kereb without being discovered. Should he actually accomplish this, there was still no promise of complete success. He might discover nothing, and in such case he would be in far worse plight than before, since he could not return to the camp, where Ali Kereb would certainly find out what he had done, and punishment at his hands was a thought on which Bob did not care to dwell.

'Mir Abid!' called a voice at his side, breaking abruptly in on his thoughts.

At the sound of the name under which he was known to his companions, Bob rolled over and raised himself on his elbow to find one of the men standing beside him.

'It is the order of Ali Kereb that you saddle your horse and ride with him,' Bob was told.

There was no time to consider the possibilities of this fresh development. By the time Bob had finished saddling his horse, he saw a dim, mounted figure waiting for him at the edge of the firelight, and an instant later he was following Ali Kereb's broad back into the open desert. They rode perhaps ten miles at a deliberate pace and in absolute silence, the tall leader not so much as turning his head to glance at the man who followed him.

'Either he's dismissed his suspicions in regard to me or his nerve is simply enormous,' was Bob's



thought. 'I could have put a bullet in his back any time this past hour and he must know it.'

Ali Kereb checked his horse and motioned to Bob to halt, and the certainty of the Arab's movements made Bob realize how feeble a thing his own desert craft was by comparison. It was impossible to make out objects more than a few yards away, and those only dimly; there was nothing visible to serve as a landmark; Bob could have made no more than a rough guess at the distance they had traveled or the time it had taken them to cover it, and yet Ali Kereb had halted as confidently as though a lantern had been hung on a post or he had been timing himself by a split-second watch. He dismounted and spoke to Bob for the first time.

'Ride back the way we have come while you count one hundred slowly,' he ordered, 'then wait. If any appear behind you, ride to me at once and without noise. And remember that those who carry out my orders do not make mistakes!'

It was not easy to tell how long the wait lasted. Bob had nothing to do except to peer occasionally into the blackness at his back and listen for possible sounds which he was certain would not be heard. For the rest he watched the tiny spark of red, glowing and waning, rising and falling, which he knew was the end of Ali Kereb's ever-present

cigarette. Once the devilish laughter of a prowling hyena sent a shiver up his spine and two or three times he heard the scurrying of some small animal which he could not see. Beyond these small things nothing happened, until all at once he saw a little flashing streak as Ali Kereb struck a match, and at the same instant, seeming to materialize like ghosts out of the night, a long string of camels came padding over the sand from the north, gathered in a knot and halted at the spot where Ali Kereb had posted himself. Bob could just make out the tall shapes and now and then puffs of light night wind brought sounds to his ears — the movements of the animals, the creak of packstraps, a faint mutter of speech.

‘I might about as well be a hundred miles away,’ he muttered. ‘I could have guessed at this sort of thing without seeing it. And yet I don’t think I’d better risk going closer. If I want to keep a whole skin to-morrow, I’d better have Ali Kereb find me exactly where he told me to stay! I do believe the man has eyes in the back of his head and can see as well at night as by day.’

Evidently the Arab’s powers of vision were not so great as Bob had thought, for there was a sudden flicker, and then the red, wavering light of two or three torches. In the glare, Bob could make out the figures of a dozen or more men and see that

the camels were heavily loaded, most of their burdens consisting of the long, narrow wooden boxes which could mean only one thing — rifles! And rifles coming by caravan from the north meant that there was some substance to the mystery, that some agency from outside was supplying the Dervish forces with arms and ammunition.

But the true extent of the organization, the number of rifles and rounds of ammunition which had already been shipped across the Mediterranean and thence carried by camels across the desert from some secret port of entry on the coast, could not be determined from the mere glimpse of a single string of camels briefly illuminated by the light of torches. And Bob was not even granted a long time for such long-distance spying; the lights burned only long enough for Ali Kereb to make a swift inspection of the burdened beasts, then darkness fell again, and it was so thick and dense after the temporary illumination that by the time Bob's eyes had readjusted themselves the camels had vanished, and a shift in the wind prevented him from hearing the sounds of their going.

A moment later he heard the click of a horse's hoof against a stone, and the figure of Ali Kereb appeared almost at his side.

'You have heard nothing behind you, seen nothing?' he asked.

‘Nothing at all,’ Bob answered.

‘There have been times,’ said the Arab, ‘when I thought one or two of those ignorant dogs were minded to follow me, but evidently they value their skins too much to be curious. No,’ he added as Bob started to drop back, ‘you will ride at my side, for I have certain things to say.’

He rode for a little without speaking, then began abruptly:

‘All men are liars. That is true in times of peace, and in war a rule without exceptions. You lied to me the other night when I questioned you. How many lies you told I cannot say, but it does not matter. You have a clever tongue and a mind which is not afraid to think, and it is of such men that I have need. By this time to-morrow night we shall be in Omdurman, and the men with whom you have ridden will be scattered among a dozen different commands, where their talking will do no harm should their tongues begin to wag. It is a mistake to kill stupid fools just to keep them silent; separate them from each other and their fears will do that just as well. . . . Do you understand what you have seen to-night?’

At the question, Bob’s wits were all on guard.

‘I have seen a shipment of rifles and ammunition, bound for Omdurman,’ he answered. ‘From where they come I cannot guess, save that it is from the north.’



‘You have eyes, I see, and sufficient wisdom not to say all that is in your mind until you have discovered how much it is safe for you to tell. That does not displease me. Tell me what else is in your thoughts, Mir Abid, touching what you have just seen?’

‘I have no other thoughts,’ Bob answered after an instant of hesitation in which he had to do some swift thinking.

Ali Kereb gave a short chuckle and then said:

‘Still wisely silent? Well, that is no great fault. Suppose I ask more questions to test your wisdom further. I heard you talking to the others, and I think that you lied to them somewhat as you lied to me. I shall ask you the same questions now, and I do not believe that you will lie again . . . So tell me, Mir Abid, do you think that in the end these accursed English will be killed or driven into the sea?’

Again Bob allowed two or three seconds to pass before he answered, and now he saw that the truth would serve him better far than the cleverest avoidance of it or pretense of stupidity.

‘No,’ he replied, ‘they will not be beaten. Even though we shall succeed in killing all those whom I have already seen, others will spring up to take their places, and still others when they are gone. Besides that they have better rifles which will

shoot farther and straighter, great guns which will kill a score where a bullet kills one, fire-ships upon the Nile and the fire-monster on its iron road. In the end they must conquer.'

Ali Kereb appeared to be considering this answer thoughtfully.

'Now if such thoughts as yours had been in the minds of many men,' he said at length, 'there would have been no war against Egypt, and these English would have stayed beyond the sea where they belong. But most men are fools, and among them the Khalifa and Mahmoud — who has got what he deserved. In Omdurman at this moment they are beating the drums and rallying the hosts for another battle, after which, the holy men are telling the people, there will be no more white men and the Khalifa's flag will float in Cairo. Madness! There will be no battle!'

'Then for what purpose are the rifles we have just seen?' Bob asked quickly.

'They are for killing Englishmen and *fellahin* just as they appear,' answered the Arab, 'but perhaps all the rifles which passed before your eyes in their boxes a few minutes ago will not be fired in the present campaign, may not have to be cleaned for two, three, perhaps five years. Yet in the end they will be used, and for the purpose I have just mentioned.'

‘I don’t understand,’ Bob confessed with entire truthfulness.

Ali Kereb turned in the saddle, and Bob knew that he was again under the scrutiny of those brilliant eyes, although he could not see the man’s features in the darkness.

‘For the present,’ the Arab told him, ‘it is not necessary that you should understand more than is now clear to you. Before you are many hours older, your eyes shall be opened. For the present it is enough that you should give thanks to Allah for the sandstorm which brought you under my eye. Otherwise, you would probably have died from an English bullet or bayonet. Now it is not impossible that before your beard has grown you will have a thousand men at your back — and not a thousand ignorant blacks armed with spears either!’

Abruptly as he had begun to speak, the Arab fell silent, and during the rest of their ride back to the encampment, there was no sound save the clink of stirrup-irons, the creaking of saddles, and the muffled beat of hooves against yielding sand.

‘If you are not a fool,’ Ali Kereb said as they parted, ‘you do not need to be told to breathe no word of what I have said to any of your fellows. If you are a fool, my warning is of no use, and your folly will bring your death as sure as to-morrow’s sun!’

## CHAPTER XV

### THE DERVISH CAPITAL

To say that the supposed Mir Abid was the one figure in the circle of silent shapes about the embers of the camp-fire which did not so much as close its eyes during the night is to give no more than a partial idea of the nervous tension which kept Bob awake, though motionless, while the desert stars burned bright and then at last began to pale before the coming of the dawn. He would have been only too glad to exchange places with the weary sentry who, half-nodding in his saddle, rode his horse slowly in long circles about the camp all night, for the degree of his suppressed excitement made it almost impossible for him to keep still, and yet he did not wish to betray to any of the men through an appearance of restlessness that the events of the ride with Ali Kereb had been anything out of the ordinary.

As had happened time and again since the very hour of his landing in Egypt and the sight of Peter's somber face on the wharf, he felt that he had been caught in a swift current of events, and, although the time for action would surely come and he would have to call upon all his strength



and resourcefulness, all that he could do for the present was to let himself be carried along.

There was something thrilling and at the same time almost terrifying in the thought that perhaps at this very moment he had more of the broken bits of the mystery in his hands than all the rest of the Sirdar's Intelligence Department. There were still many gaps in the chain, but he believed that he was beginning to see what the missing links would be like when they were supplied. His father's death, the strange speech between the two men on the steamer, the faulty cartridges, the white face during the raid on the railroad, the half-solved and wholly frustrated plot in the Labor Battalion, and now Ali Kereb's unfinished confession and the string of gun-laden camels moving like unreal shapes through the night toward the Dervish capital . . . all these separate events had a connection, and within two or three days he might be able to piece them all together into an unbroken story.

Such dangers as he had already faced would be nothing compared to those which would close about him the instant he placed himself — as he must do — entirely in the hands of Ali Kereb inside Omdurman. Half the problem had been solved with totally unexpected ease, but the very nature of the solution made the second half look

harder than ever. One of the chief obstacles had seemed to be getting into the city; thanks to circumstances, this did not have to be given another thought. But getting out again now appeared the barrier which might prove too much for him. In the guise of one of the fugitives from Mahmoud's broken force, it would have been easy for him to lose himself in the city once past the outer barriers, and it had appeared that getting out again would be simple for such an unimportant person. But as the trusted lieutenant of Ali Kereb (whose rank in the Dervish army was still uncertain, but who surely was a man of some little influence) his movements would not be so free from observation. And, finally, the chance of communicating with any of the other British agents — a thing which Captain Gray and others had told him would be almost too difficult and dangerous to be attempted — now seemed absolutely out of the question.

Contrary to the practice which he had followed, Ali Kereb let his band rest all through the next day, and they did not begin the last leg of the long journey until a short two hours before darkness. Bob hoped that there might be further revelations, that the bearded leader might talk to him again, but the Arab rode alone at the head of the column not indicating by so much as a glance

that there was a man in the party whom he had taken somewhat into his confidence.

Bob regretted that his entrance into the Dervish capital would be made under cover of night, and that not until after he was inside the gates of the city would he have a glimpse of the desert stronghold toward which the Sirdar and his army were patiently fighting and struggling their long way up the Nile. Ever since childhood, the word Omdurman had been as familiar to him as London or Cairo or New York. He had heard it on the lips of his father, of Peter Garth, of veterans in the regiment who had fought against the Dervishes. He remembered one veteran (unfortunately a man who had a poor reputation for telling the truth!) who claimed to have been for three months a captive inside the walls, and who told marvelous tales of huge buildings, a teeming population rivaling the great cities of Europe, the Khalifa's vast palace, guarded by hundreds of his picked fighting men, and the golden dome over the tomb of the Mahdi — the prophet whose teachings and the religious zeal they had aroused had been the foundations of the Dervish power. One of his old nurses had been wont to frighten him by tales of the Black Men of Omdurman and their fondness for carrying off small boys who did not do what they were told.

These wild stories which he had heard in childhood might contain the truth and again they might hold no scrap of it. The place was buried in mystery; nobody really knew what sort of place it was which lay out in the desert beyond Gordon's burial-place at Khartum. Few white men had ever been inside it — and most of these had stayed, for the Khalifa's captives had slim chances of escape with hundreds of miles of empty desert stretching between them and freedom.

'A few hours now,' Bob kept muttering to himself, his eyes on the white back of the man in front of him, 'and I shall know something of the truth. But how in the name of the impossible shall I ever be able to carry that information to the men who need it?'

By turns thinking of what lay before him and half-nodding in the saddle, Bob sank finally into that half-conscious state into which one is so apt to fall during a long ride through the darkness when it is impossible to see even the landscape. He was aroused by a mutter of speech from the men about him and straightened himself in the saddle.

They had reached the top of a swell of ground, from which had it been daylight they would have commanded a view of a wide prospect. Even in the darkness, it was plain that they were now close



to their destination, for in many directions Bob saw the twinkling of tiny fires, and still beyond them there was a widespread, dull glow, by means of which he could catch faint gleams of a huge dome, and he knew that what he saw was the Mahdi's tomb, the most conspicuous building in the Dervish capital.

And now, at the very gates of the city, there began a strange whittling away of the little force. Dark as it was, Ali Kereb seemed to be following a definite route without difficulty, although their direction was constantly changing. They turned left, rode for a few hundred yards, were halted by a sentry who was no more than a white blur in the night, and went on leaving two or three of their men behind them after a low-voiced conversation between Ali Kereb and some of the men in the encampment. A few minutes later they turned to the right and the process was repeated. Every twist and turn brought them closer to the city, and as they went forward the twinkling camp-fires were closer and closer together.

'If these are all military encampments,' was Bob's thought, 'there must be a huge army outside the walls. And if there are still more inside, the army we shall have to fight before Omdurman will make Mahmoud's forces on the Atbara look like a corporal's guard!'

With the swift dwindling of the party, the distance between Bob and Ali Kereb had diminished, until he was riding at the Arab's heels and there were only two or three more of the men left. These left them a moment later, and a gesture of the bearded man's hand summoned Bob to his side.

'There is little time left for talk,' Ali Kereb began as Bob reined in beside him, 'but I have waited until the last moment because I have found that a young man listens best and forgets least if he knows that a thing will be told him only once. I might have told you days ago, as soon as I decided that you were one for whom I could find use, but that would only have given you a chance to ask yourself questions, to forget much that you should remember. And it might have tempted you to speak to others who were not fit to share your knowledge.

'Within an hour you will be among the men who are to put an end to English rule in Egypt and establish a rule more powerful than that of the ancient kingdom itself.'

'You are taking me to the Khalifa himself?' Bob exclaimed in astonishment.

His companion gave an exclamation of disgust.

'The Khalifa!' he repeated scornfully. 'A stupid, cowardly savage, unfit to rule a desert village,

to say nothing of a great state. He is nothing. He is not even a good leader; even Mahmoud, whom you say you saw taken prisoner, was a better. No, it is not to the Khalifa that I shall take you, nor to any of his emirs, although there are a few good men among that number, but to those who understand better how to use the power which came into being through the preaching of the Mahdi years ago. And you must not be surprised to see white faces among them!’

At this speech a hot, prickling sensation seemed to begin at the base of Bob’s spine and travel up it until the very skin of his scalp stirred. He could not have answered for a few seconds had he been called upon to do so. Night after night he had dreamed of hearing such words, of seeing the thing which had just been promised him. It was a few seconds before his confused thoughts settled enough to let him hear what his companion was saying.

‘We know,’ the Arab’s even tones went on, ‘that the white man is not to be beaten with spears and worn-out Remingtons. Neither is he to be beaten with mere numbers, although they are not to be scorned. You were in the battle with Mahmoud; what would have happened, do you think, if his soldiers had carried weapons as good as those of the English?’

Bob did not answer for an instant. Before his eyes there passed the picture of the Dervishes, dauntlessly facing the British fire with their useless spears and swords, and then another picture of what they might have done had they possessed repeating rifles instead of the cold steel which they never had a chance to use.

‘I think they would have won,’ he answered honestly.

‘You think that because you saw what happened and can understand what might have happened,’ Ali Kereb said. ‘If the Khalifa and his advisers had possessed such knowledge as is now yours, they would have been wise enough not to fight until they were ready. If we had been able to persuade them, there would have been no battle on the Atbara. To-night you will hear why there will be no second battle before Omdurman, and why the British will return to Egypt thinking that they leave a broken and conquered Soudan behind them.’

Abruptly the Arab fell silent. Bob waited for him to continue, but he said nothing more and they rode on without speech. Although nothing was to be seen, save by the gleam of scattered fires and now and then a smoking torch or crude lamp, Bob had a sense of being constantly surrounded by people.



‘Shall we not reach the gates of the city presently?’ he asked.

‘Gates?’ the Arab repeated with a short laugh. ‘There are no gates. We have been inside the city these last ten minutes.’

Bob found it difficult to believe the statement. He had seen nothing resembling a street, and they had been compelled to move slowly and cautiously to avoid the holes and hollows with which the ground was pitted, while the scanty illumination had showed him no buildings of any sort other than half-ruined native huts such as were to be found in any village along the Nile. Nor had there been any signs that the place was occupied by a military force; not a single sentry had challenged them or tried to bar their path since they had left some of the outer encampments earlier in the evening. As far as Bob could see, it would have been perfectly simple for a British general in full uniform to make his way to the very heart of the city, and he said as much to his companion.

‘To-day,’ Ali Kereb admitted, ‘Omdurman is less a city than a rabbit-warren. But to-morrow — who knows? And now we will speak no more, for we are coming to a quarter in which there may be more people stirring and I prefer not to be seen to-night.’

They had indeed reached a part of the wilder-

ness of wretched huts which bore a little more resemblance to the sort of city Bob had expected to see. There was now a semblance of a street, although they still had to proceed warily because of the litter of rubbish and the frequent pot-holes, half-full of filthy water; they could make out fairly regular rows of one-story houses, and here and there torches had been stuck on poles and left burning in a feeble attempt to light the street.

As they advanced there were more signs of life; voices from inside dimly lit buildings, more frequent white figures flitting through the shadows, and a deep, regular booming note from some point still some distance beyond them, which Bob guessed was one of the great war-drums. He had little chance to speculate on the little he saw or what part of his surroundings was hidden from him, having enough to do to keep his horse from stumbling and follow his companion, who picked his way with the unerring swiftness and certainty of a prowling cat.

After what seemed hours — and which must indeed have been some little time, as it had been sufficient to bring them much closer to the invisible drum which still throbbed at regular intervals — they came to a considerably larger building which had the dignity of two floors and several windows, which showed lights within shining

through thick curtains. Here, too, they encountered the first signs of vigilance, for two men stepped out of the shadows, leveling spears or bayonets which glittered faintly, and Ali Kereb exchanged some words with them in a tone too low for Bob to hear. Then the Arab dismounted, signing Bob to do the same, their horses were led away and they were admitted to the interior through a narrow doorway. They crossed a court, entered a second door, groped their way down a passage which was as dark as the night itself, then the Arab pushed aside a curtain and stepped into a good-sized room, lighted by three smoking oil lamps fastened to the wall by iron brackets.

Even this dim light seemed fairly blinding after the hours of darkness, and Bob stood blinking uncertainly, seeing only that several men were already seated in the room, squatting on cushions against the wall in the Eastern fashion, and that there were places for several more.

If the arrival of Ali Kereb and his companion created any satisfaction or surprise, the fact was well concealed. He was received by grave nods from the seated men, salutations which he returned in kind before taking one of the vacant places and motioning Bob to another at his elbow. Then he lighted a cigarette and sat staring at the wall of the room, silent and inscrutable as ever.

As soon as his eyes focussed themselves to the changed light, Bob began an examination of the men who were already in the room, a task which was not easy, since the light was poor and most of them, after the first glance, kept their eyes lowered. There were five of them all told, all dressed in the white *gibbehs* with colored patches and none bearing any distinguishing marks of rank which he could discover. One was a huge black with a flat-featured face which gave no sign of intelligence, two — both somewhat older than Ali Kereb — had the plum-colored skins and cleaner-cut features of the Baggara or some of the other Arab tribes. The remaining two, on whom his interest was centered after the first glance, were certainly white men.

At first Bob felt as though he had suddenly awakened from a disordered dream to find the room full of the strange creatures which had moved through his sleeping visions, or had encountered on the streets in full daylight the Little Tailors or some of the other figures out of fairyland. For all the bits of proof, he had all along found it hard to believe that he would really find white men in the inner councils of the Dervishes, and this first glimpse of paler faces in the circle of dark skins came with a shock of surprise.



Beyond the fact that the two were certainly Europeans, he could be sure of nothing. One of them was much darker than the other, with a small moustache and a scar on his cheek, running from the corner of his eye almost to the line of the jaw. The other had one of those fair skins which no amount of sun and wind can tan permanently, with blue-gray eyes and fair hair. He might have been a German, a Scandinavian, even an Englishman, while his darker companion was just as probably French or Italian. They alone of the five broke the silence by speech, talking together in low tones which did not carry the width of the room.

There followed perhaps fifteen minutes of silence, broken only by the muttered talk of the two men and the faint movements of the others. Save for these slight sounds, the stillness was absolute; the gathering might have been taking place in the open desert instead of in the midst of the city. Then a door closed somewhere, footsteps sounded, and instantly there was a stir in the circle of waiting figures. The two white men ceased talking and drew a little apart from each other; the gigantic black straightened himself and then leaned his huge shoulders against the wall, while Ali Kereb ground the fire from his cigarette against the packed earth of the floor.

Then, through the same doorway by which he had entered a few minutes earlier, Bob saw three men enter the room. The first two were Arabs, both of whom went at once and seated themselves on two of the unoccupied cushions, while their companion remained standing in the center of the room, his glance traveling slowly around the circle as though he was assuring himself that all were present.

He was tall and very slender, yet in spite of this slimness he gave an impression of great strength, and he had made no attempt as had the other white men to copy the dress of his companions. He did indeed wear a *gibbeh*, but it carried none of the patches, was belted in at the waist and flung back to show an ordinary underdress of flannel shirt, whipcord riding-breeches and knee-boots.

But it was the man's face rather than his dress and figure which caught and held Bob's attention. His face was long and narrow, clean-shaven, with a hard, grim mouth, sunken cheeks, heavy eyebrows which met in a straight black line above a pair of piercing gray eyes which had the same slightly staring, unwinking look of an owl's. Bob did not need a second glance to assure him that he was at last face to face with the man whose brain had conceived this inner conspiracy, and a flash

of intuition told him that this man and the supposed newspaper correspondent who had ridden into the desert months before with his father's troop of horse were the same!

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE INNER CIRCLE

THE tall man did not take a seat in the circle about the wall as the others had done, but remained standing, the owl-like stare of his gray eyes passing from one face to another. Bob watched this performance from under half-lowered lids, and saw that even the proud Arabs and the gigantic Soudanese dropped their eyes beneath the man's look. An instant later he felt it resting on him and raised his head to meet it, and at once he experienced the same sensation as when, years before, standing before the traveling cages of a circus, he had looked straight into the eyes of a tiger. The man's glance had the same blank, unwinking steadiness, gave Bob the same feeling that it was passing straight *through* him.

'Who is this stranger, Ali Kereb?' the man demanded sharply.

'A survivor of the Atbara, Excellency, who was blown into my camp by a sandstorm. A youth of intelligence and courage, who should be of much use to us.'

Instead of replying the man continued to stare fixedly at Bob for a few seconds, then stood with



his head slightly bent, his chin resting on his hand in a thoughtful attitude. The circle waited, watchful, expectant. Suddenly the man raised his head, flung his flowing robe over one shoulder with the dramatic gesture of an actor in a cheap melodrama, and began to speak in Arabic.

‘The hour has come,’ he announced, ‘for the Inner Circle to do its appointed work. To delay longer is to let these blundering fools butcher in another useless battle the fighting men of which we shall make other and better uses, who shall, ten years from now, form the regiments of a new empire against whose walls the English power will be forever broken!’

During this extraordinary introduction, Bob felt that he must be dreaming. The speaker’s manner was so theatrical that it hardly seemed possible he could expect to be taken seriously, and yet a glance at the tense faces in the deep shadows of the room showed every eye fixed upon that strange figure, every one of the robed shapes bending forward to catch every word.

‘All that I have done to make ready for this hour is known to none of you,’ the tense voice went on. ‘I have moved among men of all colors like a shadow, and they have not guessed my presence nor known of my deeds until it was too late to prevent them. Before ever the whisper of my

name had been carried into the desert, I lived in Cairo, known by sight and by name to those English whom I hate, yet pretending always to do one thing while I was busy with another, at which they would have trembled could they have guessed the truth.

‘They thought me a harmless scribbler, yet those very letters which went to Marseilles and Trieste and New York and which they thought so innocent were laying the foundations of their ruin. I worked little by little. Here a word in the ear of a desert chief whose services would not be required for months to come, there gold in the hands of some English-paid native official who would sell his mother or his child for a few pounds, again a few cases of good rifles hidden securely until the day of their need. Even then, you here in the desert were doing my bidding, although you had never seen my face nor heard more than the whisper of my name.

‘Now and then, in order that they might have a foretaste of my power, I have struck the English. I did so when I came first into the desert before the beginning of this foolish war. I might have come silently after my custom, but, knowing that every sting of fear I gave the English was so much gain, I traveled with a British officer and his native troopers. I vanished, leaving behind me

the officer and his men dead in the moonlight, and on the lips of a man I could trust a tale of cowardice which was not good for the English opinion of themselves, or for those natives whom they have whipped into their service!’

For a full two minutes thereafter, Bob Sherwood did not hear a word of what was spoken. He sat with every muscle as tense as though he had been braced against a knife-thrust in the back, a roaring in his ears, his hands clenched so tightly that the nails cut deep into the palms. It was all that he could do to keep from springing to his feet and throwing himself upon the man who had just boasted of Sherwood Bey’s murder. Had there been nothing to consider but his own safety he would have sprung, even with the knowledge that a dozen strong hands would have seized him before he could grapple with his opponent. But the long months of discipline, and the rigid self-control which he had been forced to practice until it had become automatic, held him motionless, only the hardness of the long jaw muscles in his cheeks betraying his emotions — and all eyes were too intent upon the speaker to spare a glance for this recruit who had come among them in the company of Ali Kereb.

When the overwhelming wave of feeling ebbed enough to let him resume a complete conscious-

ness of his surroundings, the high-pitched, hateful voice was still speaking, the man having turned now from his boastful accounts of his own deeds to the plans for the immediate future.

‘To-day,’ he was saying, ‘there are more than forty thousand troops in and around the city who will fight for the Khalifa and his generals if they are so ordered. By the time the invaders are at the gates, there will be ten thousand or twenty thousand more. We know that it would make no difference if there were a hundred thousand. If they fight there can be but one result. There are not two thousand first-rate rifles in the whole Dervish army save those of which we alone know, there are no machine guns except those which I have hidden, and their wretched artillery is more likely to explode and kill the men who serve the guns than it is to send its shells among the enemy.

‘If we had not use for them in the future, we should let these thousands be slaughtered without a thought. But as they are one day to be the soldiers of the new empire of the inner Order, they are to be saved. And they can be saved only if there is no battle. If they are disarmed and scattered, the English — who are fools — will be easily content. They will not put the inhabitants of Omdurman to the sword, lacking the wisdom for such measures. They will march through the



city in all their silly pride, beating their drums and waving their scarlet flags, then they will march to Khartum and pay honor to that slaughtered idiot Gordon whom they consider such a hero. After that, they will go back down the Nile to Egypt and leave us to our work.

‘I say, then, that there must be no battle. How shall we prevent it? By the removal of the Khalifa and a few others. But these removals must not be managed by ordinary means; a revolver shot or a spear thrust in the streets will not do. These men must appear to die because Allah does not consider them fit for the work they have undertaken to perform.’

He paused, reached into some recess of his robe, and drew out a little sheaf of papers.

‘On these papers,’ he explained, ‘are the names of those who are in our path. I shall place the names in a bowl, and you will each draw one. The name of the Khalifa himself is not among them; his removal is reserved for my own hands!’

He crossed the room, dropped the slips of paper into an earthen bowl, shifting them about as he did so, then raised the bowl high enough so that each of the seated men had to reach up and could not see the papers as he drew. One by one the men drew out the slips, glanced at them, and hid them from sight.

‘On each slip,’ they were told, ‘there is a number opposite the name. To-morrow, beginning at the second hour of the morning, you will come to me, one by one, at the place where you know I am to be found by day, and I will explain to each the manner in which his service is to be accomplished. He who has drawn the number one will come to me at the second hour, number two at the third hour, and so on. During four days and nights I shall be seen by none of you, save at that hour to-morrow when each one comes to me for his instructions. But on the fourth night from these, we shall gather here!’

Again he stopped, and Bob thought that the strange proceedings were at an end, when the piercing gray eyes were suddenly fixed on him, then shifted to Ali Kereb’s dark features as the man said:

‘Now, Ali Kereb, in the presence of all the others, I would question this latest recruit, whom you have brought to this secret place so confidently. How are you named?’

‘Mir Abid,’ Bob replied.

For ten seconds that seemed more like a hundred those strange gray eyes held Bob’s, then the man exclaimed:

‘I have seen you before!’

‘It is possible, Excellency,’ Bob answered, ad-

dressing the man by the only name he had heard given him. 'Much of my life has been spent in Cairo among the white men.'

The mysterious leader continued to stare, frowning in perplexity as though trying to recall when and where he had seen Bob's face, then, his tone even sharper and more penetrating than it had been, he began to ask questions. No prisoner subjected to the merciless 'third degree' by the police had ever had to bear a more searching, deliberately puzzling cross-fire of questions. He sought only to lead Bob into contradictions, to trip him up in some statement which could be proved false. Again and again he turned to Ali Kereb to get confirmation of Bob's replies, but the Arab shook his head.

'He speaks truth touching such matters as I know, Excellency,' he said. 'Concerning the other things you have asked him, I can say nothing.'

Perhaps fifteen minutes the grilling interrogation went on, then the man appeared satisfied, drew the flowing robe about him so that most of his European clothes were concealed and made a gesture of dismissal.

'Go!' he commanded them. 'But do not fail to be here two hours after sundown the fourth night from this. Ali Kereb, do you and Mir Abid remain after the others have gone.'

The squatting figures rose, bowed, one by one, to the man they had addressed as 'Excellency' and vanished. Bob watched them go, and suddenly became aware that one of the two whites — the dark man with the scar on his cheek — was staring at him fixedly. As soon as Bob met his eye, the man's gaze dropped to the earthen floor, but as he looked down he raised his hand, the fore and middle fingers slightly extended, rubbed his cheek, and then rubbed his forehead. For a second Bob paid no attention, for the gesture seemed perfectly natural, then a tingling like an electric shock ran through him as he realized the significance of what he had seen. Without hesitating he gave a slight cough, then shifted his position and folded his hands. He did not look up. In an instant he would know whether or not the man with the scar was watching him. Two or three seconds passed, then some one cleared his throat. Bob kept his head bent, but glanced up from beneath his brows in time to see the man with the scar staring aimlessly up at the ceiling of the room, at the same time slowly caressing his chin with his left hand.

There could no longer be any chance of a mistake: that exchange of seemingly meaningless gestures had revealed the man with the scar as one of those secret agents buried somewhere in Om-



durman of whose possible presence Bob had been warned. How the man had guessed, what had prompted him to make that first gesture Bob could not imagine. But the thought that he did not stand alone, that there was one human being somewhere in the city who knew the truth and who would aid him if he could, gave him the first gleam of hope which he had had since entering the room.

It came just in time, for now the others had gone, and the tall leader jerked his head and walked through the curtains at the far end of the room, summoning Bob and Ali Kereb to follow him by the single word,

‘Come!’

## CHAPTER XVII

### "THE EAGLE'S" DREAM

IN a half-savage city, at war with a stronger power, governed by fear and honeycombed with plots, as Bob guessed that Omdurman must be, a walk at night through the pitch-black and almost impassable streets appeared too dangerous a venture for any but a strong armed party, yet 'His Excellency' strode away as carelessly as though he had been walking in Piccadilly or Broadway in full daylight, leaving Bob and Ali Kereb to follow as best they might.

'Now that you have seen the man who is called "The Eagle," do you understand all that I told you while we were yet in the desert?' Ali Kereb asked as they stumbled along in their efforts to keep pace with their guide's speed.

'I do,' Bob answered. 'And I can see why you follow him so eagerly.'

'He is a true believer even though his skin is white,' Ali Kereb said with the confidence of perfect faith. 'He will complete in time the work which the Mahdi left unfinished, and which his followers like the Khalifa have almost spoiled.'

A twisting, stumbling walk of a few minutes

brought them to what was for Omdurman an almost palatial residence, although in Cairo it would have been a very ordinary native house, a mud house which had the dignity of two floors, a stout outer wall, and an open courtyard in the center. The Eagle led his companions into a room in which there were traces of the European — one or two chairs, an oil-lamp of American manufacture on a low table against the wall, and, on a shelf near one of the chairs, the first row of books on which Bob's eyes had rested for many a month.

The Eagle threw off his native robe and hood, seated himself in one of the chairs, and began pulling at the long stem of a bubbling water-pipe. Bob came close to a small mistake which might have made trouble. He almost yielded to instinct and seated himself in one of the remaining chairs, remembering just in time, following Ali Kereb's example and squatting on a cushion against the wall.

With a nervous energy far greater than he had displayed during the meeting they had just quitted, The Eagle began to talk. Whether it was the loss of the Arab garments or a genuine change in his manner, he seemed far more like a European than he had standing in the circle of his followers, and Bob watched him thoughtfully as he listened, paying less attention to the man's words than to

his manner, the tones of his voice, the changes of expression which flitted across those sharp, hooked features which gave some foundation for the name which had been given him.

By degrees the feeling which Bob had experienced at the first sight of the man's extraordinary gray eyes hardened into certainty. The Eagle was just far enough from complete sanity to be the most dangerous form of maniac. Somewhere in his past was an injury — real or fancied — which he had suffered at the hands of the English, and which had changed the whole color of his thoughts and nature of his life. His one thought had become revenge, and the abnormal twist in his mind, instead of turning him into an ordinary lunatic, had sharpened wits which were naturally keen and concentrated all his powers on a single object.

But, even as Bob realized that for him The Eagle was such a source of danger as made his ultimate escape from his present position almost hopeless, he knew that the Anglo-Egyptian forces had nothing to fear from the work the man might do among their enemies. The Eagle was just mad enough so that his schemes lacked that element of practicability which would have made them really dangerous. They were sufficiently clever so that they had won the allegiance of white-skinned



ne'er-do-wells like those Bob had seen earlier in the evening, and fanatics like Ali Kereb and the other Arabs who had sat in the circle. They might even go so far as to succeed in the series of assassinations which he had planned, and turn the city into a disordered riot like an anthill which has been disturbed. But his dreams and talk of a future desert empire built on the fragments of the broken Dervish power were as impossible as the pretenses of a child playing with his toys on the nursery floor.

‘Upon the three of us here,’ announced The Eagle, after a long, wandering tirade, which had skipped from his secret dealings with the representatives of mysterious secret societies in France and Italy to detailed plans of his future empire — ‘upon the three of us here falls the duty of removing the Khalifa himself, the chief obstacle in the path of our success.

‘I myself will deliver the blow, but you will attend me. On that day whose evening shall see the next meeting of the Inner Order, I shall have an interview with the Khalifa. At the end of our conversation, he will be a dead man, as you shall see with your own eyes. On that same day, most of his chosen leaders will also die. They will not be shot or stabbed in the streets. By nightfall, the whole city will know that they have perished,

and will be ready to believe that the hand of God has fallen upon those who have led the Dervish armies to defeat. On the next day, we shall declare ourselves, so that when the British come to Omdurman' — and at the word his thin lips drew back, showing his teeth in an evil smile — 'they will find, not an army, but a peaceful city biding its time!'

Here The Eagle paused, laid aside the stem of his hookah, and clapped his hands.

'It is late and you must have ridden far to-day,' he said. 'We will refresh ourselves and then sleep.'

A servant entered the room, and at the sight of him, Bob's heart almost stopped beating, for, although a good ten years had passed since he had last seen him, and the man must be very old, he was beyond doubt the same old Hannek who had chased Bob and other small boys out of a certain Colonel Chapman's garden in Cairo! Hannek had not always chased Bobbie Sherwood in those days; sometimes he had told him fairy-tales while he worked in the garden, or given him fruit from the Colonel's trees. And although the man was bent with years, the eyesight of an Arab is often keen at seventy, and his memory long. And here was Hannek in the very heart of the enemy's

country, and in the service of the man who surely had most to fear from English spies!

While Hannek was in the room, listening with bent head to the commands which were given him, Bob hardly drew a full breath. Before the old man went out, he raised his head and looked Bob squarely in the face. There was no sign of recognition in his eyes, no shadow of expression on his wrinkled features — yet why should he have looked straight at Bob and never so much as glanced at Ali Kereb?

Bob tried to reason away his fears as he waited. The man had not seen him since 1890, and this was 1898. In those eight years he had grown from a child to a man, and now, moreover, he was further concealed by a disguise so perfect that no eye had yet penetrated it. And yet he knew that he bore certain characteristics of his family in a striking degree; it was his close resemblance to his father which had made The Eagle look at him so long and hard and then exclaim that he had seen him before. It was by no means impossible that Hannek might recognize him, and if he did . . . !

The old man returned with food which he served in silence, first to his master, then to Ali Kereb, last to Bob, and during the performance he did not raise his eyes from the earthen floor.

‘What is this, Hannek?’ The Eagle exclaimed

sharply, and again the blood roared in Bob's ears.

'What, Excellency?'

'On this cake,' and the speaker held up one of the flat seed-cakes with which he had just been served, 'the words, "Fear not!" have been scratched with a knife!'

'Will the most high forgive his servant?' wailed the old man. 'I have set the words on all that I touched this day, because early this morning I saw a snake in the courtyard and I have been shaking with terror since. See, I have put the words on all the cakes!'

The Eagle seized the plate which had been placed on a table at his elbow, glanced at the cakes, then dismissed Hannek with a gesture, muttered something about the poor devil being either half-witted or in his dotage, and went on eating without further comment, while Bob breathed freely again, knowing that Hannek had not only recognized him, but had taken this clever means of reassuring him.

A quarter of an hour later he lay stretched on an *angareb* on the flat roof of the house, realizing for the first time how tired he was, yet with a mind too busy to think of sleep.

The events of the past few hours had served a double purpose: they had increased the degree of Bob's immediate danger — for he had as little to



hope from the failure of The Eagle's wild plans as from their success — but they had relieved him from the growing burden of fear that he was doomed to failure in his mission. For days he had been trying to fashion some scheme of escape which might be put into execution once he had gathered any part of the information which might be of value to the British Intelligence Department. Now he saw that, as far as the course of future events was concerned, it did not make the slightest difference whether or not he escaped from Omdurman and carried his tidings to his superiors. The Dervish power was doomed, and it would make no difference — save for the slaughter of thousands who would die uselessly — whether the final collapse came with or without another collision between the Khalifa's armies and the invaders from the north. And those detached occurrences, proving the existence of white men in the Dervish camp, had been of no significance after all. Even if The Eagle should change his disordered mind at the last minute, unearth his buried stores of machine guns, rifles, and ammunition and strike with the Khalifa instead of against him, the result would be the same. It would mean, perhaps, the lives of a few more British and Egyptian soldiers, but it could not change the inevitable result.

Absorbed with such thoughts, Bob lay staring up at the star-strewn sky and listening to the ceaseless murmur of the great city, when he became aware of another, more distinct sound closer at hand, a faint scratching as though a small dog or cat were trying to get through a door. He waited until the sounds had been repeated with such regular persistence that he could not be mistaken, then said in a whisper:

‘Hannek!’

The scratching ceased and another whisper replied to his.

‘Do not move,’ the voice commanded, ‘and do not speak above a whisper. There is danger, but not the danger you suppose. Do what is commanded you by the one who calls himself “The Eagle,” and have no fear. He walks in darkness, and he will fall at the moment when he walks most confidently. And when the time comes, you will have friends near you!’

Bob waited, expecting to be told more, and only after the silence had lasted for several seconds did he understand that this was the end of the message and that Hannek had crawled noiselessly away after delivering it. And before he could speculate on the possibilities aroused by this new complication, he dropped into a deep sleep which lasted until the next day’s sun shone squarely into his eyes.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE COUNTER-STROKE

THE three days which followed were in some ways the strangest which Bob had ever experienced. As far as he could see, there was no reason why he should not have left the house, made his way to the outskirts of the city unchallenged, and then struck off into the desert. He was conscious of no guard placed upon him, of no watch upon his movements — and yet he was by no means sure that he was as free from observation as he seemed to be. There was no guessing the extent of this secret organization which The Eagle — or, as Bob had thought of him from the moment he discovered the truth, Jonnard — had built up.

Of the man himself he caught not so much as a glimpse during the three days. Ali Kereb he saw once or twice, and, on the first of the three days, he thought that he recognized two of the Arabs who had been present at the meeting of the Inner Order. But of this he could not be sure. And certainly The Eagle did not meet his subordinates inside the house on that day when he had promised to give each of them his final instructions.

Twice a day food was brought to him, sometimes served by Hannek, who made not the slightest sign of recognition, but more frequently by a young black. Bob hesitated a long time before making his first attempt to leave the house, only to find when he did try it that not the slightest obstacle was put in his way. He simply walked across the courtyard, out the main door and into the street. If anybody saw him go, there was no sign of the watcher's presence, nor could Bob find any indications that he was being followed after he left the house.

'I believe,' he said to himself, 'that this half-mad fellow is relying wholly upon the blind, unquestioning faith of his men, and that once he accepted me for what I seem, it never entered his mind that I needed to be watched.'

Until he stepped out of the house into the street he had seen nothing of Omdurman, save the indistinct glimpses received during his entrance into the city, and the walk later from the place of meeting to the house in which Jonnard lived. Now, although the preservation of his supposed character kept him from stopping to stare about as freely as he would have liked, he saw quite enough to show him how false a picture of the reality he had formed in his mind.

Omdurman was nothing but a vast collection



of mud huts and dirt. It differed from the squalid native villages of the Soudan only in point of size. It was enormous, but that was all; in many places there were not even streets, and at best these were no more than winding paths which were hardly worthy of the name. Even close to the palace of the Khalifa there were no houses or buildings more pretentious or better built than the one in which Bob had spent the night. What the palace itself was like he could only guess, as the building was hidden behind a lofty mud wall with heavy wooden gates, but the famous tomb of the Mahdi was nothing but ordinary brick and the bulging dome (which he had heard native soldiers declare to be pure gold) nothing but galvanized iron badly covered with gilt paint.

And as a military obstacle in the path of the Sirdar and his armies, Omdurman was just as disappointing as it was as a city. That it contained a force of fighting men even larger than that which had been beaten by the British, Egyptians, and Soudanese at the Atbara could not be doubted; Bob saw hundreds of them before he had been a mile on his first wandering about the city. But he could not discover that they were better armed. The great majority of those he saw carried only the spears and swords which were so useless against the modern weapons, and the

rifles he saw were the usual single-loader Remingtons, Sniders, and Martinis, or muzzle-loaders of an even older pattern. There was no sign of the Khalifa's 'bodyguard'; the armed men near the palace looked like all the rest.

Most absurd of all were the attempts which had been made at fortification. Along the river-front ran a series of mud forts, designed to defend the city against the attacks of gunboats on the Nile, and there were old-fashioned but quite serviceable guns mounted in these positions. But they were made almost worthless by the fact that the embrasures were so narrow that the guns could only fire at an object immediately in front of them; a passing vessel would be in range for only a few feet!

Bob was able to examine these riverside defenses as he pleased, nobody paying him the slightest attention, and he enjoyed the same freedom from interruption when he began prying about the outer defenses of the palace itself, where the lolling, idle sentries did nothing more than grin at him. Here he found that the same incredible blunders had been made. The forbidding outer wall might have been a serious obstacle in the path of a force attacking the palace, for it was high, thick, and well built; but its makers had neglected to provide a firing-platform on the in-

side, so that it could only be defended by men standing on its top, and so in worse plight than their assailants!

As he walked back toward The Eagle's house after his tour of investigation, Bob coupled what he had just seen with the appearance and actions of the swarms of black and brown humanity through which he made his way and understood why the triumph of the Anglo-Egyptian army had really been certain since the railroad provided it with a source of supplies, and why the wild schemes of The Eagle had been hopeless from the first.

'Why they're no more than a pack of half-savage children playing at war because they're too ignorant and lazy to do anything else!' he said to himself. 'If they happen to win battles, they'll go on fighting for the sake of loot. If they get thrashed, they'll throw away their guns and go to work for the men who thrash them. And the Khalifa hasn't set up a real government at all; he's holding all these huge armies in check by fear and cruelty — and it looks to me as though he's starving the people into the bargain. All this would collapse inside a year just from dirt and rottenness even if our army never came a foot closer to the walls!'

Yet, though this close-range glimpse of the very

seat of the Dervish power had showed him how empty the threat against Egypt had been all these years once adequate preparations for a desert campaign had been made, these discoveries hadn't in the least lessened his own danger. As far as he knew Hannek and the man with the scar on his face were the only friends he possessed among these hostile thousands, and the events of the next few hours were only too likely to put an end to the comparative freedom he now enjoyed.

Once more he had to wait with what patience he possessed for events to take their course. He spent most of his time in the strange house or close to it, lying in one of the inner rooms during the heat of the day, watching the life of the city from the flat roof at other times, listening to the occasional vibrant booming of the great war-drum, the calls of the priests, the incessant voices of the native women, who seemed to outnumber the male population of the city by almost two to one. So little attention was paid to him that he began to feel as though he was a disembodied spirit moving about the place invisible to the other inmates.

On the night before the fourth day, which had been appointed by The Eagle as that on which the members of the Inner Order were to strike against the Khalifa and his chief supporters, Bob



was again aroused by the faint sound of scratching. He called cautiously, having caught no more than occasional glimpses of Hannek in the meanwhile, and having received no notice whatever from the old man.

‘Go in the morning as you are commanded,’ came the warning whisper. ‘The Eagle will never strike, since his talons have been blunted without his knowledge. But he does not know that he has been betrayed, and he will go without fear. On the way to the palace, he and those who are with him will be overpowered. Do not try to defend yourself, but yield without resistance to the first man who attacks you. Otherwise I can make no promise of your safety.’

‘But tell me more that I may be ready,’ Bob begged. ‘Where will the attack take place?’

There was no answer. Hannek, or whoever had brought the message, had already slipped away and the house was as silent as before the faint scratching which had attracted his attention.

Before dawn he was aroused by one of the black servants, who tugged at the end of his bedding until Bob opened his eyes.

‘Excellency waits below,’ the man said, ‘and he is in haste. Go quickly, for his mood is not good.’

Bob hurried into such of his clothes as he had laid off for the night and descended to the main

room of the house, where Ali Kereb, silent and calm as ever, was eating a deliberate breakfast in the light of the American lamp, while The Eagle, a cigarette in one hand and a bowl of very strong coffee in the other, was striding up and down the room. Bob had not seen the man for nearly four days, and was astonished at the change in his appearance. Jonnard looked more than ever like one gone mad or in the grip of some wasting, feverish disease. The skin of his gaunt cheeks seemed stretched even more tightly over his prominent cheek-bones, and there were deep hollows under his eyes and at his temples, but the eyes themselves burned even brighter and he was so full of nervous energy and excitement that it was impossible for him to keep still.

‘He’s in no condition to carry out even a good plan, to say nothing of a poor one,’ was Bob’s thought, but as soon as the man began to talk, he found that he had done him an injustice. The Eagle might be close to complete insanity, yet it was evident that at such moments his twisted wits were at their best.

Speaking with his usual breathless swiftness, as though fearful that he would not have time to finish, he explained to his two companions every move which they were to make from the instant they left the house until their grim work in the

audience room of the Khalifa's palace had been finished. Nor was it the hare-brained plan of a visionary; it revealed careful planning and an exact knowledge of the procedure at the palace when the Khalifa granted interviews to his subjects. He had made allowances for every small slip which could be foreseen, left nothing to chance. And it soon became evident why he had summoned Bob and Ali Kereb several hours before he needed them: he went over and over the plan, step by step, making them repeat their instructions until he was sure that each of them had every detail by heart.

'When the Khalifa and I are alone,' he repeated for the tenth time, 'you will withdraw into the hallway to the left and there wait until I join you. It is important that we leave the palace as we entered it.'

He stopped, stared blankly at the wall for a little as though he had forgotten their presence, then bade them join him in three hours, dismissed them with one of his abrupt gestures and resumed his restless pacing up and down the room. Ali Kereb vanished into some part of the building (Bob had not yet gained any accurate idea of its size or of the people who were sheltered beneath its roof) in which he must have been keeping himself most of the time since their arrival, while Bob

climbed back to his observation post on the roof.

There are times when three hours can seem very much like three days or even three weeks, and this was one of them. As he waited, Bob could sympathize with the high-strung, half-mad creature in the room below, who never stopped his tiger-like pacing of the room during the long period of inaction. It was hard enough for Bob — how much worse then for the man who knew that on the events of the morning depended the success of the long, patient months of planning to which he had given all his energies!

Bob was at least better off than The Eagle in that he had something more than his thoughts with which to occupy himself, for much staring down from behind the low, mud parapet of the roof had not lessened the interest he felt in watching the stir of life which was always visible in the streets save during those hours of the day when the scorching sun was at his worst.

‘What gets me,’ he muttered aloud as he leaned with his chin resting on his crossed arms, watching the passage of a string of donkeys laden with great shapeless bundles and urged along by a score or so of shouting blacks, ‘is what all these countless thousands of people *do* with themselves all the time! Here’s a city that must have a population, including the fighting men of the army, of



several hundred thousand. Perhaps a quarter of them are soldiers, although I doubt there are quite that many. A few thousand shopkeepers, priests, officials, say twice that many slaves — and then what in the deuce are all the rest of them? I give it up; it's beyond me!'

At intervals he stared toward the river, wondering how many hot weeks must yet pass before the gunboats of the Sirdar's Nile flotilla would be steaming upstream and silencing the clumsy batteries of the forts, and how long it would be ere columns of khaki-clad Egyptians and bare-kneed Highlanders would be visible crawling across the low ridges which made the skyline to the north of the city.

On this point he knew that he dared not let himself hope. Although nearly two months had passed since the successful assault upon Mahmoud's defenses on the Atbara, at least that much more time must pass before the striking of the second blow. The Dervishes might campaign in the desert for an indefinite period, but their enemies could not. The blacks and *fellahin* of the native contingents might have been able to push on toward Omdurman in April, but the British troops required time for rest and recuperation after their weeks of Soudan sun and Nile water. The sick-list had been growing steadily during the

last weeks of the spring campaign, and to have pushed the white troops farther in the worst of the summer weather would have been to triple the number of deaths at the very least. So Bob knew that at least another month must pass before the new movement began, and that much more time before the Camel Corps scouts would catch their first glimpse of the gilt dome of the Mahdi's tomb.

And through all that time — no matter what the consequences of the next few hours — he must wait until some sign from Hannek, the man with the scar, or perhaps some other British spy in the hostile city joined forces with him in an effort to reach the distant headquarters of the invaders. For Bob knew that alone he could no more accomplish the journey than as though his goal had been the moon instead of a spot only a few hundred miles distant. If he . . .

A sharp summons from below broke in upon his thoughts, and he hurried down to find The Eagle and Ali Kereb mounting their horses in the courtyard, while a third awaited him. No words were spoken as the heavy wooden gate in the outer wall was swung open for them and they rode into the street. Ali Kereb showed the same half-sullen, impassive face which he always bore. The Eagle looked like a sick man who had been driven to

rise from his bed and mount his horse by some inner fire which made him superior to bodily weakness. They rode through narrow, filthy streets, crowded with people and animals, two young blacks on foot running ahead of them, shouting at the top of their lungs and laying about them with long sticks to clear a passage. Bob rode with the hood of his flowing cloak pulled close about his face, but his eyes darting this way and that, watching for the first sign of the interference which old Hannek had promised. Nothing happened. Chiefs of different ranks were forever passing through the streets in this fashion, and they attracted little or no attention, the crowd closing in behind them intent on whatever business their passage had interrupted. And now, no great distance ahead of them, Bob could see the outer walls of the palace.

‘If this counterplot has missed fire,’ Bob muttered under his breath, ‘there’s going to be the very deuce and all to pay! Because, if the Khalifa’s own people don’t know what’s in the wind, and Jonnard really gets into the palace with the two of us at his heels, he’ll do what he’s planned as sure as shooting, and bad as this place is now it’ll be a thousand times worse before night! If anything’s going to happen, it’s got to do it before we’ve ridden three hundred yards, and Jon-

nard will be as hard to stop as a wounded lion now that he's got this close to his goal!'

Yet on they went, and nothing happened. Here, as elsewhere in the immediate vicinity of the palace, the street was wider and in better repair, and the houses which lined it were built with some uniformity. The street seemed strangely empty and silent. Only a beggar or two, the inevitable wandering dogs, and a single water-carrier, with two dripping skins hanging from the end of a yoke across his shoulders, were in sight, and it was so silent that the clatter of their horses' feet sounded abnormally loud. And now the palace wall was less than two hundred yards ahead of them.

Then, just as Bob's growing uneasiness was turning into a certainty that something had miscarried, the quiet and deserted street came to life in a startling fashion. There wasn't a single cry; nothing but a sudden swirl of bare-legged men in short white tunics who swarmed out of doorways and from behind house walls, surrounding the three horsemen, some leaping for the horses' heads, others blocking the road in front, while others moved to cut off their retreat.

The Eagle and Ali Kereb, taken completely by surprise, had instinctively reined in their horses, and they had no chance to make use of the ad-



vantage a mounted man has over footmen who try to stop him. Bob, mindful of Hannek's warning, checked his own horse and made no effort to reach his weapons, his glance playing swiftly over the men clustering about him in search of Hannek or the scarred cheek of the man who had given him a signal the night of the meeting.

He caught — or thought he caught — a glimpse of the old Arab on the fringe of the crowd, and half-raised his hand to signal him, when there came the wholly unexpected development which changed everything.

Bob had seen that Ali Kereb, in spite of his size and strength, had been instantly overpowered and dragged from his horse, and he supposed that The Eagle — no giant at best, and whose strength must have been worn down by the strain which showed in his emaciated features — must have offered even less resistance, when there came, more rapidly discharged than he had ever heard them, the short, thudding explosions of a heavy revolver and a wild chorus of yells. The swarm of men about The Eagle fell back, leaving four of its number writhing on the ground, and before they could close in again, their intended victim had whirled his horse and charged into the very midst of them, clearing a path with a second revolver and a sword which he wielded with the same astonishing ease and swiftness.

As much by the total unexpectedness of the move and the almost superhuman savageness of the attack as by his extraordinary skill with his weapons, The Eagle ripped a way through his assailants, gained a clear space, then, swinging his horse a second time, tore ahead, not down the streets the way he had come, but straight for the palace.

The amazing thing had happened within the space of a few seconds, yet there had been time for a second and final change. For, as The Eagle spurred toward the closed gate at the end of the street, it swung open to admit the passage of a score or more of the Khalifa's Baggara horsemen, double that number of infantry pouring out into the street behind them. Blocked in this direction, The Eagle swung his horse to the left, leaped a low wall with the ease of a fox-hunter and vanished.

But the Baggara, without paying any heed to this lone horseman who whisked out of their path so nimbly, charged straight for The Eagle's late assailants. Too late, Bob realized that this latest element in the affair was no part of the rescue of which Hannek had warned him, and that he must look to his own resources if he was to escape. With any freedom of movement, he might have been able to imitate The Eagle and win clear through the speed of his horse, but he was caught for a few

seconds in the dissolving flood of the men on foot who had swarmed out from behind the houses, and before he could turn the frightened animal, the horsemen were upon him. His revolver was of no use in such a pass, and he made no effort to use it, flattening himself against the neck of his horse and trying to force a way past the Baggara close to the house walls at the edge of the street. He made a few yards this way, then felt the shock of a heavy blow on the back of his head, and realized, in the instant before his senses left him, that he was pitching forward out of the saddle.

## CHAPTER XIX

### POLOPOLOS, THE GREEK

WHEN he next opened his eyes he was conscious of nothing but a pain so violent that he closed them again at once. The brief glimpse had showed him nothing of his surroundings except a single square of comparative brightness in the midst of gloom. For a little he was content to lie quite still and make a very cautious examination with his fingers, keeping his eyes closed, since the pain in his head was not so great when he did so. He was lying on the ground or on an earthen floor packed hard as stone. Aside from the pain in his head and a slight stiffness in one knee, there seemed to be nothing the matter with him. A gingerly investigation with one hand discovered a good-sized lump on the back of his head, but the blow — he remembered now the last seconds of the fight in the street — must have been struck with the flat of a sword or the shaft of a spear because it had not bled.

He found after a few experiments that if he moved slowly his head did not throb so painfully, and he decided to increase the violence of his movement gradually before he began an examination



of his surroundings — though an examination was hardly needed to convince him that he was a prisoner in some part of the Khalifa's rambling palace.

He was just embarked upon these cautious movements, his eyes still closed, when a cheerful voice exclaimed in the first English he had heard for weeks:

‘Coming round, are you?’

Bob sat up. He would probably have done so at the sound of his native tongue had his injuries been twice as serious and painful as was actually the case. Standing just inside the door on the far side of the room was the white man with the scarred cheek who had revealed himself as a British agent.

‘I'm all right except that this clout on the back of my head aches like the deuce,’ Bob answered slowly. ‘What happened and where am I now?’

‘You're in an abandoned native house not a hundred yards from the spot where you dropped two hours ago,’ his rescuer answered. ‘Luckily for you, you went down like a sack of meal and it never occurred to anybody who saw you drop that you weren't as dead as a grassed snipe. I waited until the Baggara had cleared the street and taken themselves off, then crawled back for one look to make sure of you, found you were a

long way from finished, and dragged you here — which was no small job, as you outweigh me by about forty pounds and I'm no Hercules either!'

'Did they get Jonnard?' Bob asked.

'Jonnard?' the man repeated uncertainly.

'The Eagle, I mean.'

'They did not. That's one reason I was mighty glad you still had breath in you. That man is still enjoying his liberty, and if ever anybody needed to be laid by the heels, he's the man. And it isn't a job I'm keen to tackle by myself.'

'But we can't possibly stay in Omdurman!' Bob exclaimed.

'Can't we!' repeated the other with a grin. 'That shows how little you know about this crazy place. If this had happened in London or even in Cairo, I wouldn't give a counterfeit penny for our chances. But here, our danger ended when we'd saved our skins. The Baggara who rode us down didn't know what it was all about: clearing the streets and spearing a few citizens every now and then is just part of the day's work. We could stroll past the palace sentries this minute and never be molested. No, if we had nothing to worry about except dodging the Khalifa's guards, we shouldn't need to lose sleep.'

'Then you think The Eagle is still in the city?' Bob asked.

'I'm sure of it. And because he's the next thing to a madman, he's dangerous, because there's no guessing what his next move will be.'

'But to-day's failure must have pretty well ruined his organization,' Bob argued.

'Wiped it out,' his companion admitted readily. 'But that won't bother him much. Crazy as he is in many ways, he knows how to handle these people. Let him organize another handful, go out and cut off a British supply column or something like that, and he can have a thousand men at his back overnight if he cares to gather them. That's why it's so easy to start a war in this corner of the world and so near impossible to keep it going. These people would rather fight than eat, and they'll follow any man who leads them to one victory after another. What they can't stand is the hard work that has to be done between battles.'

'Then what are we going to do?' Bob asked.

'To-morrow,' answered the man with the scar, 'you're going to start working for me, and inside thirty-six hours at the outside, we'll know where The Eagle is and what new deviltry he's hatching. Then, seeing the puzzled look on Bob's face, he went on: 'Wonder what sort of work I do, eh? Well, as far as Omdurman in general knows, I'm a Greek storekeeper named Polopolos — the only Greek who's managed to push this far into the

Soudan, and who prospers because he's a better buyer and seller than any Arab. And nobody's going to look twice at a young native who suddenly turns up at my stall in the bazaar.'

As a matter of common prudence, the man who called himself Polopolos waited until after darkness had fallen before leaving the house in which he had taken refuge, and while they waited he puffed at a short pipe and talked steadily.

'You're the first real white man I've talked to for two years,' he explained. 'The other white scum here doesn't count.'

Listening to him was like dipping here and there into the pages of some book of adventure. He seemed to have been almost everywhere and done almost everything, to have no country of his own, and not too much respect for the men of any particular race.

'I've fought under a dozen flags,' he admitted, 'and sometimes against the very one I'd served the year before, but I'm trusted because men know I'm honest. I'll do almost anything if I'm paid for it, but I've never betrayed the men who paid me.'

Under cover of darkness, they left the house and made their way to the deserted bazaar, where Polopolos lived in two mud-walled rooms behind his tiny shop. As they passed the scene of the



street fight, Bob caught glimpses of several white shapes scattered about the roadway, and realized that nobody had taken the trouble to remove the bodies of the victims.

'Like as not they'll lie there for two or three days,' his companion said when he commented on it.

Even the dull pain in the back of his head, and the exceeding stuffiness of the room in which he lay could not keep Bob awake that night, but he was not given the invalid's privilege of lying late abed in the morning. Polopolos roused him before six, fed him a meal that bore more resemblance to an English breakfast than anything he had eaten for months, talking steadily while they ate.

'Your job,' he said, 'will be that of a setter dog for the time being. I won't say you're as safe in the streets here as you would be in Trafalgar Square, but you're in no more danger than anybody else. Your face isn't known to a dozen men, and after yesterday's business, they won't be hunting for trouble. Getting a glimpse of The Eagle — or Jonnard as you say he's known in Cairo — won't be much of a trick. He's too sure of himself to keep under cover, and he may show himself any minute. But just seeing him isn't enough; we've got to find out what he's up to and

throw a crowbar into the machinery if we can. You saw yesterday what he can do with weapons. I've run foul of some ugly customers in my time, but I don't know any other human being who could have got out of that mess without so much as a scratch. He's the most dangerous man I've ever known, and that's saying a lot.'

'If you've known this all along,' Bob said, 'I don't see why you haven't done for him yourself, or, for that matter, why you and I don't try it now. Lord knows, I've no stomach for shooting a man in the back, and I'm not sure that I could bring myself to do it even to him, but it seems to me that rendering him harmless is a part of the work you and I are supposed to be doing.'

'Knocking one man on the head,' Polopolos answered, 'is one of the easiest jobs in the world, and there are times when it turns the trick. If I could have driven a knife between our friend's ribs when he was putting his horse over that wall yesterday, I'd have done it before you could wink. But this man's marvelous skill with weapons isn't the only thing that makes him dangerous. If his mania had taken the form of religious frenzy instead of a desire for revenge on the English, I believe he'd have raised a bigger following than the Mahdi himself. He's got a tongue that talks sheer magic, and I don't believe there's a language on

earth in which he can't be eloquent. He can set a roomful of civilized Europeans standing on chairs and shrieking for whatever madness he proposes, and among such folk as these blacks and Arabs he has even greater power. Give him twenty-four hours and he'll have twenty men ready to risk their necks for him. Give him twice that length of time, and he'll have them at the point where they'll carry through the job he's given them even if he gets scuppered in the meanwhile. That's why a bullet in the back to-morrow wouldn't do the trick. Once we find out what fresh deviltry he's hatching, and how we're to stop it, putting him out of the way is the right move; but until then it gets us nowhere and only makes his trail harder to follow. So you start in playing the setter dog with your nose to the ground and if you ever want to see Cairo again, don't let him find out you're training him!'

From that hour there began a period in Bob Sherwood's life which was ever afterward to seem more like the experiences of some other man of which he had read rather than one through which he had actually passed. For a few hours each day, when he sat in the stuffy room behind the shop talking with Polopolos (which was probably not the man's real name, but the only one he ever gave) he was himself, a young American in the

British service: at all other times he was Mir Abid a young Arab. He talked Arabic, came even to the point where at times he thought in Arabic; his dealings were wholly with men of his adopted color, and his disguise had become such a matter of habit that several times he almost forgot those occasional applications of walnut stain to some parts of his body which were needed.

And yet, while he turned himself into the species of two-legged setter dog of which Polopolos had spoken, he ranged the bazaars and streets of the dirty, swarming city without profit. The Greeks' confidence seemed to have been without good foundation: there was never a sign of The Eagle. It seemed as though his horse must have gone straight up into the air instead of landing on the firm ground beyond the wall he had leaped, for the man seemed to have vanished, and Bob neither had sight of him, nor could he pick up any rumors which carried a hint of the man's operations in any other quarter. But the faith of Polopolos in his own prediction never wavered.

'Be patient,' he advised. 'I'm a good guesser in such matters, and it's not often I'm mistaken. He'll turn up sure, and what's more he'll do it before Kitchener and his regiments are hammering at the gates!'

Six long, stifling weeks passed, during which



Bob worked himself to the leanness of a greyhound, hating the life at those times when he let himself dwell upon it, but setting his teeth and going on, although any hope of success had long since left him. And then, one afternoon, as he was walking back to the shop after squatting for hours listening to the gossip of the bazaar, he caught sight of a tall, lean figure with a pair of army boots showing beneath his *gibbeh*. Instantly Bob shrank from sight into a convenient doorway, for one glance was enough to convince him that Polopolos had been right all along: The Eagle had flown back!

## CHAPTER XX

### IN THE EAGLE'S CLUTCHES

YEARS earlier, just before he made his first try for dangerous game in the older man's company, Bob had received from Peter Garth advice which stood him in good stead now.

'A man who says he isn't afraid of a lion or a buffalo or a rhino is a liar,' Peter told him. 'If he wasn't afraid, he wouldn't bother to take a gun when he went after 'em. Even with the advantage a rifle gives you, just keep on being afraid. But fear and panic are two very different things. It's sound, saving fear that makes you hold steady and put your bullet in the right spot behind the fore-leg of a charging lion; it's panic that shakes your hand and makes you miss him. And the one thing above all others to keep in mind when you're hunting dangerous game is this: either keep yourself so far away from him that you know you're out of danger, or stick to him so close that you *know where he is every second!*'

It was this last phrase which shot into Bob's mind and stayed there when he caught his first glimpse of The Eagle's unforgettable figure, and he was wise enough to let Peter's counsel be his

guide. To him, this gaunt man was more dangerous than any lion or buffalo, and safety lay in keeping so close to him that his whereabouts were always known. Bob did not go back to the shop until he had watched Jonnard make several small purchases in the bazaar and then followed him to a little cluster of tents pitched a quarter of a mile beyond the outer fringe of the city. Then he reported to Polopolos.

'I've seen The Eagle,' he said. 'He's camped outside town with a dozen men, mostly blacks, and he showed himself in the bazaar an hour ago.'

Polopolos was not excited by the news. Instead of commenting upon it, he puffed at his pipe and studied Bob thoughtfully.

'Need help?' he asked.

'Not yet.'

'I thought you wouldn't,' the Greek said with a grunt of satisfaction. 'Stick close to him until you know his game. I'll take a hand when you need me, but for the present the risk's far less if you play a lone hand. The last time he saw you it was in a tarbush with smooth cheeks. Now you wear a turban, your moustache adds three years to your looks and that scrub of beard another five. Unless he gets a long, long look at you, he'll never spot you for the recruit who rode at his elbow a few weeks ago.'

‘And you’d better not lose any time. This is August twenty-third. A fresh British contingent reached the Atbara nearly three weeks ago, and Kitchener’s army has started rolling south and rolling fast. By now they’ll have licked up half the miles. They’ll be here inside two weeks unless something slips — and when Kitchener’s running a show, there aren’t any slips. So we’ve got about ten days to put a spike in The Eagle’s new guns if he’s got ’em planted, and he wouldn’t have turned up here at this time if he hadn’t.

‘Now, remember, the city to-day isn’t the same one in which I jerked you out from under the hooves of the Baggaras’ horses. On that day Hannek and I had no trouble hiring enough men to spoil Jonnard’s game, and it would have been just as easy to hire enough for an attack on the palace. But to-day, with the British sweeping down and the emirs drilling their regiments outside the city, it’s different. You and I are pretty much alone. I don’t know ten men I could buy outright this minute, and there’s not one of ’em I would trust not to betray me to the Khalifa if I offered him money. So if you run into anything ugly, you’ll have to get yourself out of it. There are three good holes where you can run to cover: here, and at Hannek’s, and in the empty house where we hid that afternoon. Beyond that you’re in your own hands.’



As the work of the spy is only the work of the general on a very small scale, Bob's first move was to do everything he could to secure his lines of retreat in case of a reverse. Dressed in rags and holding the beggar's bowl on his knees, he sat for three hours in the grilling sun while he studied the exact location of Jonnard's camp, its immediate surroundings, the best routes for approaching it and for reëntering the city, and at the same time studied the activities of its inmates.

The lay of the land was favorable for his operations, for the camp itself lay in a slight hollow; there were two or three small bits of withered scrub between this depression and the nearest hovels of the city, while the fringe of such buildings was such a tangle of mud walls, straw *tukhls*, half-ruined pens for stock, and winding paths that any one familiar with it might hope to escape pursuit once he could plunge into its mazes.

But, while thoroughly satisfied with this phase of his reconnaissance work, Bob had to admit complete failure in the more important matter of getting at The Eagle's schemes. The man himself kept under cover most of the day, sometimes riding alone into the city, sometimes keeping his tent. And his men seemed to have no duties beyond the maintenance of a guard about the camp, which was slack and careless enough by day, but at

night showed a vigilance which would have done credit to any crack regiment. As far as Bob could determine, The Eagle and his handful of blacks formed an independent command, for, though a steadily larger army was drilling and maneuvering on the plains on the other side of the city, they took no part in these operations.

‘Whatever he’s doing,’ was Bob’s conclusion after three days of this profitless observation, ‘he’s doing it after dark. I’m not too keen for night operations in such a place, but I’ll have to try them.’

That day he did not return to the shop, but made a meal of dates bought from a hawker, and at nightfall was only a few hundred feet from the spot in which he meant to spend most of the night — a single drooping thorn bush which stood just beyond the edge of the little cup in which the tents were pitched, and between them and the main road leading into the city from that direction. He knew that at night two men were always on duty outside the tents, and, while he had never stayed to watch for any great length of time after the sun had set, he had never seen any of the men on sentry go as far as the thorn bush and believed that it would serve his purpose perfectly.

It was close to sunset when Jonnard came back to camp, riding as usual with the hood of his

*gibbeh* drawn about the lower part of his face and his head bent forward. Smoke rose from the tiny cooking fires, and Bob — who could have done with more than the small bunch of dates — sniffed hungrily as the odor of roasting meat reached him. As usual, the blacks ate their meal in the open while their leader remained invisible in his tent. Then the men detailed to care for Jonnard's horse went about their duties and vanished, two sentries slouched to their posts and stood leaning carelessly on the shafts of their long spears, the other moving figures vanished, and the camp appeared silent for the night.

As soon as the darkness provided complete concealment, Bob left the beggar's bowl which had served him as a disguise and began working his way toward the thorn bush as cautiously as though he had been stalking some animal with an acute sense of hearing. Thanks to the thoroughness with which he had studied his course in advance, he experienced no trouble whatever in reaching his goal undetected, and found, as he had guessed, that once hidden behind the bush he was close enough to hear without moving, to see the tents clearly by raising his head till his eyes were above the level of the hollow's rim, and yet he was safely beyond the beats of the two sentries when, every half-hour or such a matter, they

shouldered their spears and made a casual circuit of the tiny encampment.

For ten minutes or so after he reached his convenient shelter, he heard nothing except the stamping of the picketed horse, a mutter of speech from one of the men on guard, and the heavy snoring of some sleeper, while a peep over the protecting rim showed him that a light was still burning in Jonnard's tent. Then, without warning, the sharp tones of The Eagle's voice snapped out an order, and the words were followed by the sounds of the men scrambling from their blankets to obey.

Could Bob have guessed the imminent danger in which he stood, he could have escaped without the slightest difficulty by crawling a few yards and then bolting into the night. But he had no means of knowing that the luck on which he had come to depend had deserted him, and that a pure freak of chance had rendered all his precautions useless. He was thrilled by the possibility that something was about to happen that would give him a clue to The Eagle's inexplicable inaction, and, hugging the earth as closely as he could, he hitched himself forward a couple of feet so that he could look down into the hollow, dimly lighted by the embers of the dying fires and the small lamp in Jonnard's tent.



The men were standing in a knot, their leader a pace or two behind them, their spear-points twinkling faintly. Suddenly, without an order of any kind and as though rehearsing a part they had been carefully taught (as Bob was afterward to learn was exactly the case), they spread out into a line, leaving a gap of perhaps six or eight feet between each two men, and then, in the same silence, started running straight up the short slope toward the spot where Bob was lying, The Eagle following them a pace or two in the rear.

So unexpected was the move and so short the distance which separated him from the running figures that Bob could never have got away had he made the attempt. He did instinctively start to his feet, then, realizing in a flash that his one hope was in lying still, he scuttled back under the bush, rolling himself into as much of a ball as he could manage and holding his breath. Had one of the blacks varied a scant foot from the path he followed, Bob would probably have escaped, but either the man had forgotten the bush or failed to see it in the darkness and blundered straight into it. He let out an exclamation of pain as the thorns tore through his thin clothes, then, in backing away, stepped with his bare foot squarely on Bob's legs.

Flinging himself headlong toward the edge of

the hollow the instant the man's weight was off him, Bob managed to roll bodily over the lip of the slope, but before he could get to his feet, the man who had trod on him gripped his ankle and another flung himself on him from behind, pinning him to the ground. Bob expected a spear-thrust the next instant, and it might have come had not the white man's voice called quickly:

‘Do not kill him! Bring a light!’

Somebody picked up a smouldering brand from the fire and blew it into a flame. Bob was jerked roughly to his feet and once more found himself meeting those owl-like, burning gray eyes. Yet the effect was one for which he was not prepared. At sight of him The Eagle gave a sort of gasp and drew back a step exclaiming as he did so:

‘Impossible! The man is dead: I saw him!’

Then he came forward, thrust his face close to Bob's and stared at him with a fierce intentness. Even while the other's eyes held his, Bob guessed what had caused Jonnard's amazement, guessed that his unshaven cheeks and chin had made him look startlingly like his father. Recognition and a species of relief flashed into the man's face at the same instant.

‘So!’ he exclaimed. ‘That was why your face looked so familiar when you slunk into my presence at Ali Kereb's heels!’

His hand strayed toward the revolver which he wore in a holster at his hip, then abruptly he changed his mind.

'No, that would be too easy and pleasant,' he said. 'In my life, as far as I know, only two men have succeeded in deceiving me. Both lived to wish that they had not done so. Both are dead. You are the third, and I do not envy you what lies before you.'

He turned to the men who had clustered about Bob in a menacing circle.

'Bind and gag him,' he ordered, 'and make the job thorough. He is not to escape, nor is he to be left so that he can utter a noise loud enough to be heard by any one passing along the road.'

Five minutes later, bound hand and foot so tightly that he could hardly move, the ropes already cutting into his skin, while a cruel gag not only prevented all attempts at speech, but made it difficult to breathe, Bob lay on his back in a corner of Jonnard's tent, while the latter, without giving his prisoner so much as a glance, seated himself in a canvas chair and picked up the book which he had evidently been reading when he left the tent for that strange proceeding which had ended in Bob's capture.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE LAST FLIGHT

'IN the end, of course, you will die,' said The Eagle, who was smoking his cigarette after breakfast on the morning following Bob's capture, 'but before you die you shall witness my triumph. Did you catch the significance of the maneuver which was so unfortunate as to stumble over your skulking body? Ah, you cannot answer; then I will explain. A few days from now, your proud Sirdar will enter Omdurman at the head of his victorious armies. They will enter by the road yonder, since pig-headed Britons always take the easiest path, thoughtless of danger. As he passes a certain point in the road — which you would have observed marked with a white stake had you used your eyes — my men will fling themselves upon his escort, suddenly and in silence as last night. They will be killed, of course, but while they are dying they will divert attention from me and I shall have time for one shot, which is all that I ever require. And you, with the gag still in your mouth, will stand at my side and see it happen!' And as he finished speaking, The Eagle rose from



his chair and stalked out of the tent, leaving Bob to his thoughts.

These were black enough. He knew that this time he could hope for no help from Polopolos and old Hannek, while escape through his own efforts was out of the question. One of the blacks had loosened the ropes which bound his wrists and ankles so that they no longer cut him, but the knots were as hard as ever, and he was literally surrounded by the dozen or more of Jonnard's men, so that the chances would have been a thousand to one against him even had he been able to loosen his bonds.

For a day he lay motionless and helpless as a log of wood, knowing no more of what was going on beyond the walls of the tent than he could guess from the faint sounds which reached him. He was fed twice, one of the blacks holding a spear with the point close to his breast while the other fed him. At night his bonds were a little loosened and he was allowed to walk around for a few minutes between two of his guards. The Eagle was absent all day, returning only at night.

But, although there was nothing in the prospect to give him a spark of hope, the day was far from empty, for he overheard some of the talk among the blacks, and from the fragments which reached him learned that the Sirdar was moving steadily

closer, that the Dervish outposts had caught sight of the invaders, and that the smoke of the gunboats had been seen far up the Nile.

That same night The Eagle suddenly gave orders that the gag should be taken from Bob's mouth, and when this had been done he sat eyeing his captive like a cat watching a mouse.

'I enjoy your suffering,' he told Bob, 'but I should enjoy it more if your lips were open and you could speak. But raise your voice in a single shout for help and I will shoot you instantly.'

It was a few seconds before Bob's cramped and aching jaws would permit him to speak. Short as the interval was, it gave him time to reach a decision which probably saved his life. Now that he could use his tongue, he made up his mind to use it with a vengeance. It must be admitted that he did not foresee the full consequences of his sudden determination: the one thought in his mind was that he might succeed in making Jonnard so furious that he would shoot him and put an end to an interminable period of torment which could end with nothing but his death.

So the instant he was sure that the muscles of his tongue and jaws were again completely under his control, he burst into a perfect torrent of speech. He called the man before him a murderer and renegade, taunted him with the failure of his

plots, challenged him to fight him alone with any weapons, laughed at his plan of shooting the Sirdar. It was wild talk, and there were moments when his breathless haste to pour out words made him incoherent, but as he watched the other's face he began to believe that it was not wholly without its effect. When finally he had to pause for sheer lack of breath, The Eagle stared at him, then called to a black who was lounging by the door of the tent.

‘Replace his gag,’ he commanded.

‘You call yourself The Eagle!’ scoffed Bob, ‘and yet you are so frightened by the speech of a man tied hand and foot that you dare not leave his lips unlocked! Eagle! You are not even a buzzard!’

He thought he saw the man's hand tighten. At any rate, he gave a sign which halted the black, and the gag was not replaced. A moment afterward, Jonnard stalked out of the tent, and, to Bob's amazement, he did not reappear for five days.

During this unexpected interlude, Bob spent hours in fruitless efforts to hit upon some plan of escape, and at all hours of the day and night his ears were straining to catch a sound of the rescue which his reason told him could not come. In desperation he tried to appeal to the blacks, warn-

ing them that the man they followed would lead them only to their death. But here he found that Polopolos had again been right when he spoke of the hold Jonnard acquired over his men. The blacks listened for a little in apparent curiosity, then one of them silenced him very effectively by striking him a heavy blow in the face with his open hand and then replacing his gag.

On the sixth day, when The Eagle returned, Bob resumed his efforts to infuriate his captor, shifting his ground now, laughing at Jonnard's plan and suggesting a dozen others which he declared were more likely to succeed. He knew that the man's mind was not normal, and he talked until his throat was hoarse in the desperate hope that some one of his gibes might cut through the man's silence and sting him into action.

'Why wait until the Sirdar is fairly in the city, with his triumph sure and the victory already won?' he jeered. 'Why not go out and strike him as he sits in his tent with the battle not yet fought?'

Jonnard had been sitting motionless, his chin resting on his hands, staring over Bob's head and paying no more attention to his words than he did to the buzzing of the flies against the wall of the tent. But at this last thrust he raised his head and met Bob's eye. For a little he stared at him with



that extraordinary, unwinking intentness, then, with a laugh which Bob felt was as unpleasant a sound as he had ever heard, he got suddenly to his feet.

‘By the saints, I will do just that!’ he cried, ‘and you shall not only go with me, but when the shot has been fired and I have escaped they will find you with the smoking pistol in your hand. It is a thousand times better than the way I had planned!’

He stood gloating over this new idea when there came from the city a sudden loud throbbing of the great war-drum, and then a growing roar. Bob lifted his head and Jonnard smiled at him unpleasantly.

‘Your friends draw close, Englishman!’ he said. ‘Their scouts were in sight this morning! What a pleasure it will be to you to stand beside me and watch them die!’

As he spoke, there came from the direction of the river the deep thud of a heavy gun, another, a third, then the sharp crack of a more modern weapon loaded with smokeless powder, and on the heels of these the louder, closer whangs of bursting shells. Jonnard hurried out of the tent, while Bob, trembling with eagerness and the first real stab of hope he had felt, leaned back against the wall of the tent. The long silence was broken: the

British gunboats were shelling the forts on the river!

Although it was not until days afterward that Bob heard a description of the one-sided duel, he could almost follow the progress of the fight by coupling the sounds with his knowledge of the weak Dervish defenses. The heavier notes of the guns in the forts grew less and less frequent, while the volume of the gunboats' fire and the racket of the bursting shells increased steadily. The unhappy Dervishes, unable to train their clumsy pieces through the narrow embrasures, never had a chance; the casemates were knocked to pieces one by one, the guns silenced, and, thanks to the accurate fire from the boats — which were commanded by youngsters from the Navy little older than Bob — the forts were reduced to mere heaps of crumbled bricks and the thing was over.

At the same time — though this, too, was hidden from Bob until afterward — a strong reconnoitering force of Camel Corps and cavalry, supported by infantry and guns, had been pushed close to the city, the Khalifa's army seen and even baited into advancing and revealing its full strength, and definite information brought back to headquarters on which were based the detailed plans for to-morrow's battle.

But for the time being, Bob was denied the slim comfort which a knowledge of these movements would have brought him. All that he knew was that the Eagle returned to the tent, his face wearing a black scowl of rage which he made no attempt to conceal; that for a full two hours he paced the ground in front of his tent, as he had walked the floor of his room on the night before his ill-fated attempt against the Khalifa. Then with the abruptness which characterized his strange decisions, he gave orders to his men, and in no time at all the three tents had been struck, packed on two mules, and sent into the city under guard of two men, while the rest of the party struck off toward Gebel Surgham, a low, stony ridge which lay about midway between the city and the position to which the British had already advanced — and which was to be the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting on the following day. Jonnard rode ahead, his men following on foot, Bob walking between two of them, his legs free, but his hands still bound securely.

Bob's mind was in a whirl. He could not believe that The Eagle was actually about to attempt the mad thing which he himself had suggested, or that this sudden change had increased his chances of escape. But every step that he took was bringing him closer to his friends, and in that thought

alone there was joy enough to make him a very different creature from the despairing captive of the past few days.

They struck straight out into the desert, passing so close to the great Dervish army assembled outside the city that Bob saw the whole force as clearly as it had been seen early that morning by the British and their allies. He could not believe that they would be permitted to continue their march, that the Dervish leaders — who must have realized that in their numbers lay their one slim hope of victory — would permit even so small a band to detach itself from the main force. But, although several bands of Baggara passed close to them, and it was hard to believe that The Eagle's white skin was not visible at so short a distance, no attempt was made to stop them, and they pushed on until the round cone of Gebel Surgham was left behind, and night found them no more than a few hundred yards from the line of British outposts.

Bob would have been more than human if he had closed his eyes during the seemingly endless night which followed. He knew that to-morrow's sun would shine on a British victory and the final smashing of Dervish power just as surely as it rose, but he knew, too, that it must bring him a dreadful death conceived by the brain of a man



who was more than half mad. Yet it was in the knowledge of Jonnard's unbalanced mind that he felt his one hope lay. Unless The Eagle had been gifted with the wings suggested by his boastful title, he could never reach the point, far back of the lines, where the Sirdar and his staff would be posted throughout the battle.

'Perhaps his crazy mind has slipped still another cog,' Bob said to himself a hundred times during the night. 'Perhaps he'll lose his nerve at the last minute. Perhaps he'll make some slip that will give me my chance.'

He did not spend the whole night wrestling with these thoughts by any means. The instant it was dark and he knew that he could do so with safety, he began worrying at the ropes which bound his wrists. Again and again he had to stop from sheer exhaustion, but the blacks paid him little attention, while Jonnard, by turns sitting in a bent-shouldered heap on the ground and pacing back and forth against the dim sky, did not so much as throw him a single glance. It may have been an hour before the faint notes of British bugles stirred his blood that, with a gasp of relief which he could not wholly suppress, he felt the last strand give way and knew that his hands were free.

Reveille in the British camp on that memorable

September second was sounded at four in the morning, and it was its notes which Bob heard. They roused The Eagle at the same instant, and perhaps into his strange mind there came flashes of sanity in which he realized the impossibility of his undertaking, or it may be that the sound did, as Bob believed, make him even less a reasoning being than he had been. At any rate, the course which he took doomed him from the first step, although, situated as the party was directly between the two armies, there could hardly have been escape for them under any circumstances.

'Goom!' he called to the sleeping blacks, formed them into a straggling line as soon as they were on their feet, and then led them forward, bending steadily toward the river and unconsciously blundering squarely into the path of the British cavalry, which had begun creeping out toward the enemy under cover of the fading darkness even before the infantry began to move.

Even the men themselves seemed to lose the blind faith with which they had hitherto obeyed their leader's commands. Bob saw them glancing uneasily at each other and heard a low mutter of talk. It grew almost imperceptibly lighter, and they were by now climbing a slight rise which must presently bring them out on the skyline.

What might have happened had they been a

little earlier or a little later cannot possibly be guessed. As it was, they were only part-way up the long, gradual ascent by the time near-by objects were dimly visible, and just as they reached this point, a troop of British horse, distinguished by their sun-helmets, passed along the crest, clearly silhouetted against the sky. The blacks halted without being ordered, and, thanks to the deeper shadows in the hollow, they were not seen, and the horsemen moved to the left and passed from sight.

‘On!’ Jonnard ordered curtly, but the blacks did not stir; and one of them said waveringly:

‘It is not well to go on. We are in the midst of the enemy and our own army is far off. We do not fear death, but to die here like this is madness, since it is commanded by Allah that we kill as many of our enemies as we can.’

The Eagle stood motionless, then, almost in a scream, he shouted:

‘What? You dare disobey me!’

They hung back, muttering, and with a strange cry he whipped out his revolver and began to fire. Even in the uncertain light, his aim was deadly, and Bob saw four men topple. But there were eleven of them, and the distance was short. They closed in before he could empty his first revolver or draw the second which he always carried, and

three of the terrible, broad-bladed spears reached him at once.

Before the blacks could draw back from the fallen man, there was a thud of hoofs and a hearty British shout, and over the crest came a score of lancers, their pennons whipping against the sky that was by now faintly pink. Brave enough under most circumstances, the blacks had been unnerved by what they had just done and they scattered like leaves, scattering off in all directions while the lancers spurred after them.

From the instant The Eagle's revolver flashed, Bob had stood like a man of stone, and now he came to himself to find the lancer officer bearing down on him not a score of yards off, his sword already raised. And as he looked, Bob gave a queer cry and flung up both hands.

'Layton!' he shouted wildly. 'Layton!' — and instead of running he ran forward.

Layton managed to check his horse and walked him forward, bending forward in the saddle, his sword still ready.

'Look out, sir,' called a trooper spurring up; 'don't trust him. Cut him down first, sir, and then let him talk!'

But Layton was staring with even wider eyes, and his sword arm dropped limply to his side. The next instant he was out of his saddle and had the seeming Dervish by both shoulders.



‘By Heaven, Bob Sherwood!’ he cried. ‘Now, how ——’

But Bob’s legs had suddenly gone limp, and two troopers had to lift him into an empty saddle.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE END OF THE DERVISHES

OF that amazing battle which followed, and in which he had once dreamed of taking part, Bob saw everything, and yet felt as though he was looking at moving figures on a screen. Somewhere in the neighborhood of forty thousand men formed the Dervish army when the first gun was fired; when it was over, eleven thousand of them were dead, sixteen thousand were wounded, and four thousand were prisoners. They did not wait to be attacked, but rushed out and fell upon the British, charging again and again, although none of them ever lived to reach the British lines. It was one of the greatest exhibitions of sheer physical courage and utter disregard of death contained in the annals of warfare, and when it was finished a mere fragment of the white-clad host was scattering toward the city, cut down by British and Egyptian cavalry as they fled, and the Dervish power was broken forever.

Bob had a vague recollection of the mere joy he took in the sound of English voices, of grinning back in response to the curious glances of eyes in bearded English faces. Of having men, and later

officers, come up and shake his hand, of being half-crushed in a pair of huge arms and hearing Peter Garth say:

‘Bob, boy! God knows I had never thought to lay eyes on you again!’

But it was not until several days later that he really came wholly to himself. In the meantime his story had been told a hundred times, he had talked endlessly with Peter, had listened to Layton’s gay account of his transfer to the cavalry and his subsequent adventures. But far more important than these occurrences were the long hours he had spent relating the tale of his weeks in Omdurman to the officers of Colonel Wingate’s never-sleeping Intelligence Office.

Satisfactory as this narrative might have proved as an evidence of Bob’s zeal and as proof that the mysterious plot within the Dervish organization was nothing which need cause the I.O. any further anxiety, it might not have been sufficient in itself to clear the name of Bob’s father of that shadow which still rested upon it. For, after all, his only proofs were his own word and the body of a strange-looking white man found on the edge of the battle-field covered with Dervish spear-wounds.

But on the day following the Sirdar’s entrance into Omdurman, a small, inconspicuous-looking

man with a scar on his face presented himself at the Intelligence Headquarters, and there, although Bob knew nothing of it, the Greek Polopolos told his story, substantiating Bob's narrative in every detail. He began with the moment when, warned by some underground sources of his own that another British agent had been sent into the city, he thought he recognized white features in the man who accompanied Ali Kereb, and gave the signals which were answered, and then followed the story of events step by step until Bob's disappearance a few days before the bombardment of the forts. When he had finished, there could be no doubt that The Eagle and Jonnard, Sherwood Bey's murderer, were the same man.

So it came about that a few days later Bob Sherwood, dressed in an English uniform, was standing stiffly at attention, listening to the speech of a tall officer. He knew that the officer had already said many pleasant and gratifying things, but not until the closing words of the little speech did he realize all that it meant to him. He squared his shoulders a little more as he heard the deep voice say:

'It is not merely as a reward for dangerous work well performed, but because you have cleared of all shadow of suspicion the name of a man who was a very gallant officer, and proved yourself a



## THE END OF THE DERVISHES 253

worthy son of Sherwood Bey, that I tender you, on behalf of the Commanding Officer, a second lieutenant's commission in Her Majesty's forces!'

Somehow or other he was again outside the tent, with a warm, exultant feeling inside him and Peter's big hand resting on his shoulder.

'Son,' the veteran said slowly, 'you're where Ned always prayed you'd be some day, and I don't believe even he could find any fault with the way you've won your spurs!'

THE END



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